

# On·Spec

SPRING 2000

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James BEVERIDGE

## NEW FICTION:

Steve MOHN

Keith SCOTT

Rebecca M. SENESE

J.S. LYSTER

Donna McMAHON

Linda J. DUNN

Marianne O. NIELSEN

Leslie BROWN

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## SPECIAL THEME ISSUE: FUTURE CRIME

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# On·SPEC

Spring 2000

Theme: "FUTURE CRIME"

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## COVER:

"I do gotz a Rolex. It's a cozy little Class M homeworld in the Specularus Oneria Cluster. It's got no moons but I can set yaz up wit one as a package deal. Cheap, like downtown, ya wan' it?" the sly little alien intoned to me as the noxious drip from the puffalox on his cheek dangled, refusing to fall.

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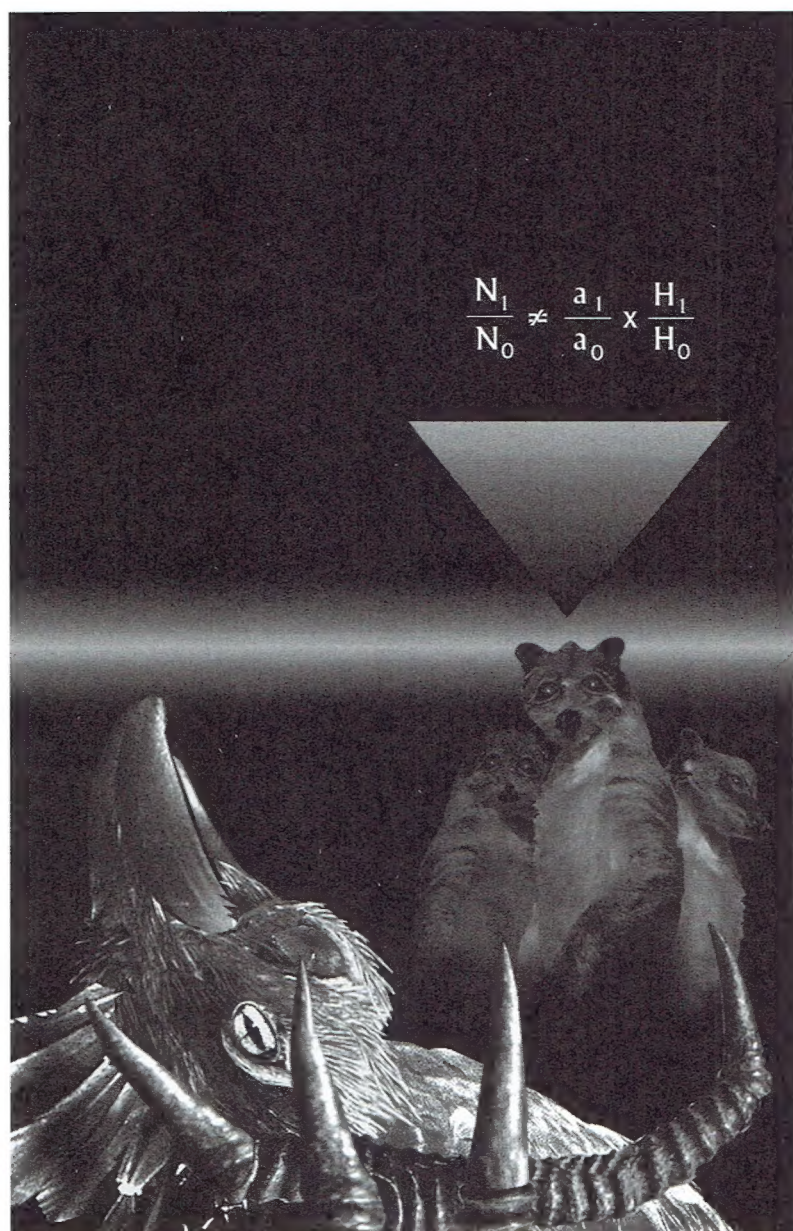
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*Frontispiece:*

"Alien Intents" (page 86) by Marianne O. Nielsen  
illustrated by Peter Watts

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# On this issue...

## Future Crime

*Marianne O. Nielsen, PhD Criminology*

**R**EADERS AND WRITERS OF SPECULATIVE FICTION do a lot of unsavory things to support their habit. I teach criminology and criminal justice, which is probably a step above robbing drugstores or mugging Microsoft executives, though some of my students might disagree with that, especially around final exam time.

One of the surest foundations of Criminology is that as long as humans interact with each other, there will be crime. I can't presume to say the same for other species, of course, but I'd bet on it...legally bet, of course. Human groups set boundaries between what is acceptable behavior and what is not. If you're on "this" side of the line you're a good citizen; if you're on "that" side, you're a scoundrel, a witch, a deviant, or a criminal. Every human society, in every time period has set boundaries. It has been said that even in a society of saints there will be sinners.

Perhaps someone glops too much jam on her morning bread, or someone ties his sash with an unorthodox knot. How much straying over the line will be tolerated? It depends on the people in power. The people who control a society control its definitions of what is a crime and what is not.

When we understand who has power in a future society, what they value and what gives them pleasure, then we have a good idea of what the crimes might be. Therefore, crime will never be "cured" because criminals are socially created, unless of course, we grow up *a lot* as a species in the next millennium or so. In other words, it's likely that crime will be a good subject for speculative fiction for a long time to come.

Okay. So—if there will always be crime, what's it likely to be?

Extrapolating from current causes of crime—sex, greed and power: the Big Three—will still be the main contributing factors. And maybe self-righteousness (though maybe that's wanting power over other people's



beliefs...?). However, because crime is socially constructed, there are no acts that are absolute crimes.

"Not even killing?" someone might ask.

No, there's a difference between killing and murder; for example, killing is legal in times of war, or in self-defense, or in police pursuit, or in capital punishment. These acts may be reprehensible and a waste of life, but not illegal.

So what specific crimes will the citizenry create? The majority of people are and will continue to be afraid of personal violence. Crime that is up close and personal is much more scary than crime that costs the taxpayer billions of dollars but happens in someone else's abandoned back lot.

So—violence in all its forms, based on the Big Three. After that, it becomes a little tougher to predict.

Vice crimes—i.e. anything I enjoy but your righteous beliefs prohibit *you* from doing—change the fastest.

Drugs, sex, gambling. Tobacco is moving into the category.

What could be next?

Fast food, hot cars, silent movies, bad shoes—There's lots of potential for stories there.

Once-horrifying crimes described by speculative fiction forty or fifty ago are now here and seemingly unremarkable: toxic dumping, organ theft, mass killings, designer drugs, homicide by infection. As each new medical discovery and technological breakthrough appears, someone somewhere figures out how to abuse it: computer virus terrorism, laughable hazardous work safety laws, theft of privacy through surveillance, blackmail through biological warfare, nuclear blackmail. With each change in the human condition—technological, cultural, economic, political, ecological, demographic, and certainly, legal—new crimes become possible.

Of course, so do new means of prevention, detection, and resolution or punishment. But there is an inevitable time lag as social control agencies catch up. Right now, the FBI is desperate to hire forensic accountants, chemists, and computer programmers. I'm sure the RCMP empathizes. Seeing a market niche, a notorious group of former hackers just incorporated as a multimillion dollar private security company—supporting once again the truism that it takes one to catch one.

And that's just dealing with the human species. What happens when we eventually meet the Other? How close or far from our boundaries will their normal everyday behavior take them? And how much will we, in our innocent, day to day lives, stomp on *their* boundaries? The potential for conflict, crime—and stories—seems infinite.

I must admit, I get tired of homicides, bank robberies, aggravated assaults, break and enters. Sometimes, secretly, I hope that someone somewhere will discover a new crime, preferably not a grisly one, just one that takes my breath away, one that is so audacious and unexpected, that it makes me laugh out loud. One that stuns us so much that it takes at least a month for

the hubbub to die down and for zealous politicians to leap to the floor of the legislature to make a new law that bans it.

Until that happens, I guess I will just have to keep looking in the pages of speculative fiction. Here I am sure to find one or two, or three or four.

## About our cover artist

JAMES BEVERIDGE is still playing with pixels although his mainstay is still airbrushing vehicles. His cut scene background work for Prelusion's (prelusion.com) adventure title, "Gilbert Goodmate and the Mushroom of Phungoria," last year comes out in March. Until he's requested to join in any other reindeer games, he's going to keep pushing paint on the public's ocular orifices.

Please see his website: <http://members.home.net/jimbeveridge> or contact him at ICQ:7069051.

## Short Story Contest update

We should have a short list soon, with winners announced in our summer issue. Keep checking the On Spec website for updates:  
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*Family is everything, but Blake Garnet is having trouble opening his heart to this new-found son...*

## Sonny Boy

Steve Mohn

“WELL,” DREXLER SUGGESTED, “THE *NAVEL* pattern is different.”

“It’s immaterial.” Blake Garnet spread his hands above two square meters of top-flight executive desk, of the same matte Mercedes Gray in which the rest of his corner office was done. The carpet could have been cut from the same bolt of flannel as the suit a Michelangelo of fabric had carved for him. The circulating air had the hush of still water; the light was that buffed silver cinematographers strive for when they want a look of understated elegance only megatons of money can buy.

Garnet, lacing his hands behind his head, sat back in a squeeze of leather, gray eyes locked on Drexler, his attorney. “I never authorized this. They grow organs for me. Skin. Marrow. Glands. I never authorized a total. What the hell would I want one for? I have real children, thank you.” Garnet rocked slightly, eyes on Drexler, then unlaced his hands and patted the desktop as if appraising it. “I suppose it wants money.”

Drexler looked at office glass tinted steel blue. “Actually, he—”

“It,” Garnet insisted, jaw like rock, eyes of ice.

“It,” Drexler acquiesced with a nod to one side, “requested an interview.”

Garnet nodded. “It wants money. All right, I’ll *give* it money. After I sue GenMed to extinction. That’s the first thing I want. They totalled me without my consent, then this thing got away—”

“It wasn’t like that, exactly,” Drexler cautioned. “There’s a warrant out on the man who did the total. That may have been some anticlonal statement on his part, or he might have been out to disrupt your affairs particularly. GenMed should be going over its personnel records and sorting through freezers to find out if any other subscribers have been likewise contradicted.”

Garnet winced. “Contradicted?”



"That's the term." Drexler shrugged. "Look, Blake, we're limited as to what we can do here. I *can't* get him, or it, completely out of your life. It has your genes, every one of them. As I said, the navel pattern is different. There are some scars picked up here and there. It is not you but it is derived from you and the statutes are clear on this. Unless you prove the derivative material was illegally obtained, you must acknowledge progenitorship."

Garnet smacked the desktop. "It *was* illegally obtained!"

"GenMed's records show otherwise. All the paperwork's in order. Consent forms, gene-smear signatures." Garnet wiped his face down with both hands and sat back, eyes open wide. Drexler said, "That's why I think this was either an inside act of anticolonial protest, or your enemies wanted a bomb in your basement with a long fuse. Proving the documentation false will be tough—it might be impossible, Blake. Unless we find *this* guy..." Drexler pulled a legal-size smarty from his briefcase, told the clear sheet, "Show the Leeb file," and slid it across.

In the left top corner, the smart sheet showed the head-and-shoulders hologram of a man in his forties. He had that thick yellow-blond hair that looks greasy and glossy at the same time, and hostile pale blue eyes. Without the smug mouth, he might have been good-looking. The rest was print: personal stats, education, vita. Garnet scrolled, not reading. Others would do it for him.

Right, he thought, like GenMed would do what I told them to do.

But he slid the smarty back across the desk.

"This—" He used an obscene word precisely. "—did the total?"

Drexler nodded, uncomfortable.

"Who obtained the warrant?"

"You did, through me."

"If the documentation is sound, what's the charge?"

"Conspiracy, manipulation, gene-nap. The kind of warrant we never got before we started making people."

"It's not people. What's GenMed's position?"

Drexler shrugged. "You gave consent. After that, the clone was farmed out to a host. GenMed's responsibility ceased. They don't even do prenatal, in a case like that. They grow replacement orgs, skins and marrows. Bones to order. Freeze the rest and charge you for maintenance. All in all, they have a good record, lots of happy customers, no bad mutes. And they're big, a little too big to elbow."

"So I can't sue them down to smoking ruins," said Garnet.

"Not likely," Drexler said, "unless we find this Lewis Leeb." He pointed at the smart sheet. "He may have things to say but he may want money. To go up against GenMed, he may want a lot."

"Would they kill him," Garnet considered, "if they found him first?"

Drexler shrugged. "Would you, if you ran GenMed?"

Garnet didn't answer. Client-attorney privileges extended only so far among an elite who risked a lot by speaking their minds. He stood.

"Under no circumstances will I

be 'interviewed' by this thing—I'll thaw one of my livers and talk with that first." Buttoning his jacket, Garnet ticked his chin at the door. "It's not waiting out there, is it?"

"No." Drexler stood, slid the smarty into his briefcase and sealed it around with thumb and forefinger. "He would—*it* would never walk into a building it couldn't be fairly sure of leaving alive."

Garnet smoothed his steel-gray temple with one hand, checked his mirror image and tweaked the necktie dimple. "That's intelligent of it."

IN THE HEADLIGHTS, THE WESTCHESTER County roads were furry to either side with scrub and low growth that hid the estates, even the higher windows. At the wheel of his Zedong, listening to Sorabji's "Gulistan," Garnet recalled what he had looked like, what he had been like, at age nineteen, the age of his illegitimate Other. What infuriated him was not the intrusion into consciousness of a clone making claims, but that this "Trew Garnet," as it called itself, had stolen Garnet's own best years. Those stolen years would wither on the branch, as had Garnet's own, but that was no consolation.

It all went back to why Blake Garnet, having realized sufficient wealth, had opened the organ bank for himself and Priscilla and the two girls. In the war on death, the prime weapon was one's own young flesh and vigorous blood, like nectar and ambrosia. Biannually, he enjoyed a transfusion of the purest blood, his own but so richly new it was

intoxicating. Priscilla did the same. They would never grow sickly as they aged, would never be worn by wearying routines of anti-rejection drugs. They would live to be a hundred and fifty, possibly more, with practical immortality around the corner, if you believed, as Garnet did, the predictions of cutting-edge research. To be like a tree, Garnet thought, clutching the earth with invincible roots! And if it was only for the rich, well, that would change. The rich pioneered expensive procedures that, in time, became less so. Garnet was not selfish—let all humanity mature to that wise old age devoutly wished for but never, until now, attainable.

But this thing, this Trew, this living theft grated on Garnet's charity, as if some part of him had snuck off to live a disgusting life. (God knew *where* it had been!) Now here it was hanging around, drooling, one eyelid drooping, leering with broken teeth, beseeching him to cut a deal while waving statutes at him. Garnet felt grimy. He knew men and women who had gone total, even further, into incest, if that was what it was. Such matters were still being worked out in law. He didn't want people thinking he had bred Trew for that!

"All right," he said aloud, "so he has a damn life." Sulking, he slowed for his turn. He's not his own, he's mine—he's my *stuff*.

He pulled into his driveway. Two square piles of stone, black iron rings embedded in the stone, stood to either side. After that was a gate invisible from the road. The driveway curved through grass gray in

the headlights as volcanic ash. Garnet parked behind a car he didn't know.

Connecticut plate. Trew's attorney was with a Hartford firm—Drexler had said...

Garnet sat building steam. In my own home, he thought. In my goddamn home! He stood from the car, slammed the door. Heard crickets, saw lightning bugs. For the first time in years he wanted a cigarette. He thought of the handgun in his desk drawer upstairs, then saw a mental picture of handcuffs, the newsreel perp walk (handheld, zooming in on his stony face), and went inside.

The hall was dark. He hung his coat, listening to the fuzz of speech in the living room, then went down the hall to the kitchen. He made a drink.

Priscilla came in. She had heard him. Tall and thin, with sheaves of pale blond hair, she pressed the door to the dining room shut with her back and said, "Susan brought them. They found her at school."

Garnet nodded, pecked at his drink. Susan attended Yale.

"Did you at least *try* to make them leave?"

"Garnet, for God's sake." She touched her forehead. "I don't think he's after money. If I'm not mistaken, this attorney he brought with him costs five hundred an hour."

"We'll know when we get the bill. How long have they been here?"

"About an hour. Susan," she said, "seems quite taken with him."

"Is she? How nice. Where's Miranda?"

"Garnet," Priscilla said patiently. "Miranda is at Groton."

He shut his eyes, apologetically nodding, and drank more. "So I suppose it looks like me."

Her hand gestured to one side, like a falling leaf: Of course.

Garnet said, "I'm not anxious to see myself young." Priscilla said nothing. He said, "You know what this is like for me? That thing in there is not my son. It's my medical insurance. It's my heart and lungs out for a walk, wearing my skin. It has no business—" He stopped and drank more. "I have to sue GenMed now. There's a warrant out on that man who did the total, someone Leeb—"

"Lewis Leeb," said Priscilla, knitting her eyebrows. "He's here as well."

Garnet stared. "Jesus Christ, do you realize—" He finished the drink fast. "There's a good chance GenMed might try to kill him. He's my lawsuit!" He thumped open the dining room door—it made Priscilla jump out of the way, then follow—and passed through the dark dining room into the next. "Lewis Leeb?" he almost yelled. He fed his hands to his pockets and swept the room, noting Susan (the younger version of her mother except for shorter hair shaved oddly) and the obvious attorney of middle years. His glance cut right past a slim dark-haired boy who had stood. Garnet felt his legs would fail him but he got his eyes past that person and steadied himself to look at the only person left, the one he had seen hologrammed on the smart sheet: that thick yellow-blond hair, the pale-blue eyes,



that smugness of mouth kept under control.

He had stood too, one hand extended.

"No, we don't shake hands," Garnet told him. "And if it weren't for the fact that I need you, and you need me more, I'd throw you out on your ass just to see if you bounce. There's undoubtedly a contract on your life as we speak. I'm suing GenMed over your malfeasance. I'm the only thing between you and a gas laser cutting your skull. Are you even faintly aware of what I'm talking about?"

He was barking by then and everyone had frozen. It was not the kind of room where people barked. Priscilla hovered near. Susan sighed hugely. Trew's attorney, eyes like hen's eggs behind his thick glasses, stood to clear his throat.

The clone said in Garnet's younger voice, "Mr. Garnet."

"Don't talk to me." Garnet went on looking at Lewis. "There's a warrant out on you. Now I can have those charges dropped if—"

"What charges?" Lewis flung out his hands. Sharp points of light iced his blue eyes but he laughed. "I've done nothing wrong!" His mouth warped.

"How about kidnapping?" Garnet said. "That's what it's called when you run off with someone against their will. That's what you did with me, my cells, my—" Garnet flailed for the word. "—my fucking mitochondria! Now I'm telling you, you don't have a lot of options here. You interfered with my body, you took parts of me—grew me without my consent. Faked my GenMed

records, my gene-smears. You think that's nothing?" Before Leeb could answer, Garnet had turned on the attorney. "Have you explained none of this to him?"

The man cleared his throat as if he had a shoe lodged in it. "Mr. Garnet, I think you should hear what young Mr. Garnet has to say."

"He's not *young* Mr. Garnet!" Garnet yelled. "He's an illegitimate sack of guts!"

Susan, all exasperation, said, "He's a human *being*, Daddy."

"As to that," the clone said, shrugging, "I'm what I am."

Finally, Garnet looked at it—him—he was—

IT WAS LIKE THAT TIME HE AND Priscilla had returned from Japan, so jet-lagged neither one could eat or talk. Somehow he had fallen asleep and then, of course, woke in the middle of the night, noticed lights on and followed them down to the kitchen, where a perfect stranger stood eating yogurt at the open refrigerator, a woman with pale blond hair. Then a pair of giant hands reached in to adjust the rear-view mirror of perception and he'd recognized his wife. It was like that. Garnet did not see his reflection. It was not the mirror image but the holographic one, the image others have of you. He was a handsome boy with almost wavy blue-black hair, steel eyes. He wore a black Nehru coat (those had come back but just for kids) and skin-tight black jeans fed into a pair of green lizard-skin cowboy boots. The only thing Garnet recognized was the look, a contemporary take on kool

vampyrs he had seen in fashion grams.

"You think this is easy, don't you? You think it's the cutest thing that's ever happened, like some adopted kid finding his birth mother. You're not even supposed to exist."

The clone politely shrugged again. "Excuse me for existing."

"I don't excuse you. I'm not excusing any of this." But Garnet was starting to feel that no one in the room was on his side. Priscilla was so embarrassed by his language and behavior that she would not look at him. Susan was openly glaring, very mad at Daddy. The attorney was polishing his glasses; without them, his eyes had that boiled look. Garnet glanced at Lewis Leeb's hostile blue eyes and smug mouth and said, "All right, let's just everyone sit down." He went to the liquor cabinet, felt like gulping brandy right from the bottle, but managed to pour some into six small tulip-shaped glasses.

They all sat down and feigned being comfortable.

"Trew, why don't you tell me exactly what's on your mind?"

"Well, first of all," Trew said, sitting forward, holding his brandy in both hands as if to warm them, "I'm delighted to meet you at last."

Garnet nodded, made some sort of noise. A corner of his mouth hooked up in what passed for a smile. Fatherly, it wasn't, nor avuncular. "How long have you known who you were? *Are*?" He laughed angrily.

"Not long," Trew said. "About five years."

"And you've been with Lewis? All that time?"

Trew hesitated. "With, yes."

Garnet swirled the brandy, watching it liquefy the light. So there are things little Trew doesn't want to tell Papa. Garnet grinned and grandly waved his glass. "Fill me in, please. I'd like to know about you."

Trew edged into it but was soon talking confidently. To Garnet it sounded expertly prepared. It was clear that Priscilla and Susan had heard it all, Susan for the third time. The attorney listened in the age-old manner of attorneys, sleeping like a rattlesnake. Lewis's eyes had glazed over but his lips had an ugly, hungry droop, like an ogre in a fairy tale cutting into hot kid pie. A lock of that blue-black hair Garnet no longer had fell onto Trew's white forehead as he spoke in a voice Garnet more and more remembered.

The story itself was not much. A New Jersey woman had hosted the fetus; had hosted several more, then retired to Wyoming where a stallion trampled her to death at a wild-west show. Corroborative Witness Number One, dust to dust. Lewis and Trew then took their little circus to Seattle, where Lewis freelanced as a gene cutter, earning enough that he could afford a series of private tutors. That sounded far-fetched, but Garnet let the yarn spin, noting only that Trew had attended neither public nor private school till he was fifteen, when they joined a commune (those had come back too) in Alabama, where he had earned his high school

equivalent. So far, he had not attended college, though he seemed smarter than Lewis.

"How's the money situation?" Garnet asked.

Trew said, "Fine," and Lewis looked at him. Looked.

Much smarter than Lewis. Garnet set the little glass on its fancy little foot. "Fascinating." What I thought, he told himself: they're broke. In his trousers pocket, his pager throbbed. He took it out, read the number and stood, dropping the pager in his pocket like a coin. "Would you excuse me, please? I have a call."

Trew stood and, fetching a quick, deep sigh, said, "Of course." He seemed, suddenly, relieved. Then again, almost electrified.

GARNET DIDN'T CARE WHO IT WAS; the call got him out of the room and back into himself. In his third-floor study he settled back in his desk chair and took the call on a secure line.

"Mr. Garnet?" A male voice, not one he knew.

"Yes, who's calling, please?"

"You have a daughter at Groton?"

Miranda. Garnet sat forward.

"Yes, is something wrong? Is she all right?"

"Yes, and she can stay that way. Or the three gentlemen with her can rape her every way they can think of and send her back to you in pieces. Don't hang up or that's exactly what they'll do."

A gust of air got out of Garnet. His hand locked onto an arm of the chair. His other hand locked on the phone. His brain locked on pictures

of Miranda as he'd seen her last: long hair, as blue-black as Trew's, parted in the middle, lips untouched by color, not speaking, her mother's eyes-crying: Daddy?

Garnet knew that he must speak, say anything.

"Wait a minute, give me a minute. I won't try to trace the call, I just need a minute. Please. Please!"

"You can take a minute, Mr. Garnet."

"Thank you, just..." He set the phone down and put his head between his knees. His fingers dug into his hair. He did not need words to line up what was happening. It was a moment of pure knowing. Trew. GenMed. And Lewis Leeb. He felt that he could write the extortion himself and read it back.

When he was sure that his voice would not fail, Garnet raised the phone. "I'm listening."

"All right, Mr. Garnet, this is what we want you to do. Get Lewis Leeb out in the back yard. Just you and Lewis. Say you have to talk to him privately. Offer him money. Lewis likes money. Once he's outside, we'll take it from there."

"And then?"

"We'll take it from there, Mr. Garnet."

"And my daughter—" But the call ended.

He held the dead phone, open-mouthed. My back yard, he thought. There are people in my back yard. This threat to Priscilla and Susan forked through his chest. But he could not picture Miranda—could not let himself picture her with those three men, could only



feel that knife at his balls.

"Okay," he said. "Okay." He started from the room like a man drawn by voodoo; it being an antique phone, receiver still in hand, he pulled the whole thing off the desk. It hit the rug. *You have no messages.* He lifted the phone from the floor, circled his desk then set it back on the floor. "Okay." He left the study and stood at the top of the stairs, holding his chin, staring at the diamond pattern of a leaded glass window.

He went down some stairs, turned on a landing, down some more stairs, turned. Easy: stairs went down. By the time he reached the main floor, Garnet no longer felt as white as he looked. At the kitchen sink he splashed hot water on his face and rubbed with a dishtowel to put some color in his cheeks.

In the living room, Priscilla and Trew's attorney were chatting like old friends, Priscilla nodding as the man said, "Vinyl just *sounds* better." Something vinyl creaked on the Panta turntable. Susan, reassuring Trew, holding his hand, glanced at Garnet. Forgiven, he thought, so long as I'm good.

He leaned over Lewis Leeb and spoke softly:

"Lewis, that call I took was mostly about you. I'm afraid—" His voice cracked but he made self-mocking laughter of it. "This is embarrassing for me, after how I behaved. But this new information ...we should talk. I've been wrong about this. There might be some money—like a finder's fee. I know that sounds—could you come

outside with me a moment, please?"

From his first desperate lie he had closely watched the gene-cutter's face, had seen cautious hostility venture toward cool superiority, achieve gloating and finally embrace greed, a foundation Garnet could build on. He's going to do it, he told himself. Garnet smiled at Trew. Susan's mouth curled sweetly. Lewis stood. "Another brandy?" Garnet suggested. Lewis felt up to it.

They walked their brandies through the dark formal dining room, the big bright kitchen and out to what had been a potting shed, screened in, all-weather carpeted. Garnet pushed the screen door wide and stumbled on the plank steps.

"Careful," Lewis cautioned.

Garnet laughed. "Nothing spilled."

"Who was it called?"

"My attorney," said Garnet. He had forgotten the man's name.

Lewis said, "Oh. Trew met him this morning. At the certification."

"Right. Sorry I couldn't be there."

"You are?"

"In light of..." Garnet peered into the darkness. Adrenalin had opened his eyes to the darkness. He saw it in metallic tones: his lawn of wire-brushed lead, trees stamped out of tin and burnt black in a fire, sky of anciently tarnished silver burred with stars. "In light of what I've just been told," he said, pausing to swirl brandy, sip and roll it on his tongue. He looked up at the stars. Where *were* they? "How

much money would you..." He stopped to consider his total worth, could not recall a dime of it, and went on: "I take it you and Trew, are you—" He took a breath. "—that is, the two of you—?"

Fast, it was. A bright blue wire of light, straight as geometry, flicked on from somewhere at the back of the lawn, jarred slightly to one side and went out. At the same time, Garnet heard a sizzle like raw egg hitting bacon grease. Lewis went, "Uhh..." and fell on his face like a concrete garden statue.

Garnet stood up to his eyes in terror so deep he could not feel it. The night silence howled. He could not decide if space was expanding away from him in all directions or closing in to smother him in damp black wool. His glance jumpcut from the corpse toward rapid, softly thudding footfalls. He made out four men in ninja black, like giant ants in night goggles. Three carried something rectangular and flat. One came right up and hissed in his face:

"It's okay, Mr. Garnet. We'll take it from here. Your daughter is fine."

"My daughter," Garnet said as if a dentist had frozen his jaw. He had forgotten her name.

"She's fine, Mr. Garnet," the featureless dark face hissed. His three bravos set the black rectangle next to Lewis. Crouched beside him, they counted: "One-two-three!" and lifted him onto the stretcher. Belts were buckled. The man in front of Garnet backed away. "Never was in any danger. Shit, man, I don't even know where Groton is." He joined the others,

took a corner of the stretcher and lifted. They ran off the way they had come.

"It's in..." Garnet clawed one side of his numb face. "Groton, that's..." He couldn't remember where.

HE HAD NO IDEA HOW LONG HE stood, forgotten brandy in hand, till Trew's (and Garnet's) voice said from the top plank step, "Too bad about Lewis."

Garnet looked back. He saw nothing.

"I've hated him," Trew said, "since I learned about you. Longer than five years ago. It was in Seattle."

Garnet's mouth tried to shape words but nothing came.

"You know why he made me?" Trew asked.

Garnet shook his head. "Some kind of...statement? Anticline...?"

"Sex," Trew replied.

Helplessly, Garnet turned away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"He wanted a toy." Trew waited but Garnet said nothing, could not link this with anything he thought he understood. "He was an addict," Trew said. "He learned early that hitting that button was better than any other dope. And he had a theory that if you raised a child to be thoroughly sexual, it would never rebel, but would always be there for you. It would always know exactly what you wanted. It would enjoy it, you see. Like food. It would know nothing else. And that's true about me. I know nothing else."

Garnet hung as if he might tip

over, working on it, fitting it up. He heard the lizard skin cowboy boots thunk three times on the planks then softly crush the grass, damp with dew. Garnet felt the cool night air revive him.

"That's not true, that you know nothing else. You're intelligent, the way you talk..."

Trew considered it, head bowed, hands lightly laced at his crotch. Then he shrugged. "Lewis didn't want a moron. Morons drool, have no speech, can't use the toilet. I have an education. Lewis hired tutors. I was taught well. You're a smart man, Blake. And I have your genes. I'm smart as smart sheets—but with nothing like the same transparency."

A match flared and Garnet winced. Trew's lean face, the lock of blue-black hair fallen onto the forehead like Superman's, grew out of the orange pool of light as he lit the cigarette. The tobacco smell made Garnet swallow with the dry thirst of longing but he said, "You shouldn't smoke."

"Oh, that's all right," Trew said as he blew out smoke. "I'll grow a new set of lungs in that organ bank you're going to open for me. After you adopt me." He pointed with the cigarette toward the back of the lawn. "Those weren't GenMed guys. I hired them. If you didn't have Lewis, you had no case. The derivative material was not illegally obtained and you'd have to acknowledge that I'm your clone—it's like ABC. But Lewis would have said *anything* for enough money. That's what he wanted—that's why he cloned you. He knew that he

could go to you some day. So he didn't slack on education. I had to be someone you could see fit to acknowledge."

Realizing that he still had some brandy, Garnet drank it.

"Give me a cigarette," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Give me a cigarette. I can grow lungs too."

Trew shook one up, lit it for him.

After a while Garnet said, "Are you sure?"

"Sure of what?"

Garnet blew smoke and flicked away the cigarette. "You sure you're what you say you are? My clone, my total? I've always thought I was cold-blooded, but what runs in your veins must be liquid at forty below."

"It may be," Trew said. "I just killed my lover of nineteen years. I watched from in there." He nodded toward the screened-in porch. "I want my birthright, Blake. You may be the victim of a theft but so am I. My whole life was stolen by that man. And there are things you learn early, so early you can't unlearn them. I'm what I am. But everything I've done, I've done to put things as right as they can be. I can't reinvent myself. But I can re-create myself."

He drew on his cigarette and flicked it after Garnet's.

"That man," Garnet pointed toward the end of the lawn, "said Miranda was never in danger."

"It cost a lot to hire those four," Trew said. "The rest was theater."

Garnet swallowed. The kid was brilliant. In one day he had shown up, passed certification, jumped



over to Yale to present himself to Susan then come here, Lewis riding along, never knowing: the cued phone call, the cool threat to Miranda that had given Garnet no time to think about police. Like a robot, he had taken the sacrifice to the lawn. He recalled the quick blue beam of light, how it had jiggled to one side, slicing bone and frontal lobes. He said, "What happens to...to the body?"

"It gets fed to a supercritical water oxidizer. It'll reduce to water, some carbon dioxide, some ash."

*It*, thought Garnet. "Just like that," he said.

"Just like that," said Trew.

Garnet looked around. He was out of brandy. "You mind if I get away from you for a few minutes? I'm not sure you won't take my head off and eat it."

Trew said nothing. Garnet went inside. Why he felt guilty for what he had said was beyond him.

He called Miranda.

She asked, "Is anything, like, *wrong*?"

"No, everything's fine," he said. "Sorry to have called so late."

"You're, like, being really *formal*."

You don't know what formal is, he thought. Trew Garnet, with true blue windshield washer in his veins. That's formal. He went downstairs. The attorney was still

there, loving vinyl. Priscilla was in the kitchen.

"Where's Susan?"

The man popped his eyes open. "Went to find Trew."

"And Lewis?" Garnet asked, his ears roaring.

Sleepily, the man closed his eyes. Smiled. "I'll be sending you my bill." His fingers strummed on his belly.

Garnet poured a brandy and sat with it on a sofa, thinking of the prodigal son and the hundredth lamb and the loaves and fishes. None of it fit. He would have to tell, what's his name, Drexler, to kill that warrant.

The attorney rose from his vinyl bliss, religiously put away the record and announced that he must go.

Garnet saw him out. He stood in the driveway, watching the Connecticut plate disappear in the dark. He felt torn in two but redeemed, like a coupon. He finished the brandy and held the empty glass upside down by the foot, in the fork of two fingers. He heard Susan laugh and looked toward the sound. Vaguely, he saw her and Trew, walking in that part of the grounds he had put into meadow. He wanted to shout to her: *Be careful! You've no idea!* But he just watched them. Tomorrow he would have Drexler draw up the adoption papers. ♣

Once you start sliding, how do you stop?

# A Slope So Slippery

Keith Scott

AGAIN THE QUESTION PULLED AT KAZ SIMIC. What was he doing in this sleaze shop? He knew damn well how Lance Packer kept his TV show on top of the ratings war. Packer did it by serving up a potent mix of slime and perversion five days a week for an adoring worldwide audience.

So why was Kaz here?

*Need.* A great unrelenting need brought him to New York and *The Lance Packer Show* studios in a converted theatre just off Times Square. It was what the Inuit called The Great Necessity, the excuse of survival. He knew he couldn't survive without Laura.

Kaz had worked his way through a forest of doubts during the hour-long flight down from Toronto. But now his doubts returned in smothering waves as he looked up the conference table at Lance Packer, the celebrated SleazeMeister and host of the show.

Kaz stopped himself firmly. No sense going into all that crap once again. Besides, he had just made an offer to Packer that he knew the SleazeMeister wouldn't refuse. That meant he was committed, in for the money, practically a done deal.

There was silence when Kaz stopped talking. Then the third man at the table, a thin gray figure sitting across from Kaz, cleared his throat.

"This is higher than we've ever gone before, Mr. Packer," the thin man said.

"Take him anyway, Fenton!" Packer growled. "It's worth a million to put Cozi Knugel and his fashion world in the tank. It might stretch to two, maybe three shows." Packer began to rise from his chair. "Besides, I can smell it from here. This guy's hungry as shit...and I like that."

Kaz glared up to where Packer now stood with his bodyguard beside him. He looked smaller than he did on his show, Kaz noted. Artful camera angling, he thought in retaliation for Packer's crack about him being hungry. But the gravelly Bronx accent was the same as on TV; so was the great mane of dark feathercut hair with its trendy flash of gray at each temple. As Kaz watched, the telegenic smile faded from Packer's face.

"I want him, Fenton," Packer repeated.

"Of course, sir," Fenton said quickly.

Kaz took time out from his sour reactions to admire the efficiency of centralized command with its clean, inarguable edicts. At least Packer runs a taut ship, he noted.

He tried to bring back the focus he had reached, or thought he had reached, in the week before this interview. He tried to center on Laura back in Toronto and her dire need, tried to convince himself once again that her precarious position left him no other choice.

The license of necessity.

Now he watched Packer come down the table toward him, treading softly on the balls of his feet, the all-purpose smile back on his face, his eyes partly hidden behind rose-colored wrap-around Corelli shades.

This guy's on camera all the time, Kaz told himself. But it was the black suit with its hand-sewn details that his eyes went back to because the smooth hang of the coat on Packer's shoulders was a dead giveaway. Kaz liked to think he could spot a Hugo Boss suit from ten,

twenty paces. Why not? Hadn't he been a fashion photographer for nearly twenty years?

God, was it nearly twenty years?

Packer stopped behind his chair and placed a hand on Kaz's shoulder. Kaz fought to keep his shoulder steady under the touch. He disliked being touched by strangers. Disliked it intensely. It did nothing to dispel his bitter mood.

"Don't let me down, hungry man," Packer said in his deep street voice. "We blaze Cozi Knugel this time. Right?" Packer laughed and squeezed Kaz's shoulder. Hard enough to hurt.

Packer's bodyguard hustled before him to the door and opened it. Nobody moved until the Sleaze-Meister and his bodyguard left the room.

Fenton shifted uneasily in his chair across the table.

"Maybe I agree. Maybe I don't," he said defensively, eyeing the air above Kaz's head. He looks like an accountant, Kaz thought. Thick bifocal glasses, off-the-rack wool and polyester blend suit, ratty unmatched tie, nervous fluttery fingers stirring through the papers before him. Fenton had everyday conventionality written all over him.

Kaz wondered. What the hell was a cookie-cutter accountant doing here?

"You'll lose the use of one eye," Fenton was saying to him. "Your choice, left or right. Most of the paparazzi we get pick the left. I don't know why." Fenton lowered his gaze to Kaz's face and waited. Kaz nodded.

"Then we cap one of your molars

with the transmission circuitry. We go all organic these days to escape detection."

Kaz nodded again.

Abruptly a flash of real feeling crossed Fenton's face. "Why are you doing this, Mr. Simic?" he said. Said it out of nowhere, as though Kaz's presence was bothering him all to hell. "I know it's none of my business—"

"You're right, Mr. Fenton," Kaz stopped him. But it really was Fenton's business, he thought sickly. He was giving in finally to the justifying necessity that had brought him here. And clearly, that made it Fenton's business too.

"Most of the contract paparazzi we get are crud," Fenton persisted. "You're a presentable, educated man—"

"With a wife who's got acute lymphoma," Kaz stopped him. "As the big man says, that makes me 'hungry as shit.' Please, let's skip the personal questions, Mr. Fenton."

Laura would kill him if she knew. He had wavered about how much to tell her. She had been wildly excited when the specialist called to say he'd found a million-to-one bone marrow match. There'd be a ninety-five percent chance it would work for her, the doctor said.

It was like getting that last minute phone call when you're sitting on death row, Laura had said ecstatically. In the end, Kaz couldn't bring himself to tell her very much about his first meeting with Charlie Walsh, the million-to-one bone marrow match.

"Sorry about your wife," Fenton was saying from across the table.

Kaz was puzzled. It sounded like Fenton really meant it. Sincerity? In this place?

"Let's go over it," Kaz said, wanting to get it done. "I'm contracting with your netshow to do a major expose of my friend Cozi Knugel, the international fashion leader. At least a half-hour *wired eye* shoot at one of his monthly pool bashes in Toronto."

"You know Cozi Knugel very well?"

"Well enough to get an invitation," Kaz said.

"Good," Fenton said. "You'll get an advance when the surgery is done here in New York. The remainder after the material is on disk. Paid directly to you or your designated heirs." He stopped, then added severely, "We've never gone this high before—"

"What happens to the eye?"

Fenton's gaze slid back above Kaz's head. "Our eye surgeon grafts in a scanner to the fovea at the back of your eyeball." He paused. "I'm afraid the surgery is sometimes irreversible, Mr. Simic."

"Sometimes...?"

"Twenty percent of reverses don't work. That is, if you decide to give up this line of work."

Christ! Kaz had known it would be a brutally desperate move. But this...sometimes irreversible? A sick dread began to work through him. He'd been afraid of something like this, still he'd put the possibility of permanent eye damage out of his mind. You hold onto hope, don't you? Right up until the last moment.

Not that he hadn't tried every



other angle in the past two weeks, every possibility, direction, combination. His friends had rallied and made gestures, mostly sincere and heartfelt, but in the end everything fell through. What Charlie Walsh, the potential donor, wanted for his bone marrow was out of Kaz's reach in the short time frame facing Laura.

Laura's family was outraged. Her brother made insane suggestions about finding a crooked medical establishment, then kidnapping Walsh, the possible donor, and taking his bone marrow. Kaz tried to tell him that there was no way, in this supposedly free society of 2006, to force a donation of bone marrow. Even if it were a made-in-heaven match.

Laura's brother was still sifting through wild schemes.

Thinking back on it, Kaz would class his first encounter with Charlie Walsh, the possible donor, as an absolute disaster. He'd parked the BMW in front of a shabby rooming house on Bleaker Street in downtown Toronto. Walsh's room was on the third floor, facing the street, after a long climb up a narrow staircase filled with creaking stair steps and indefinably offensive smells.

Kaz knocked and walked in when a voice behind the closed door directed him to do so. Walsh was standing at the window. He was an average-sized man with wild graying hair, perhaps in his late fifties, a working man well into early aging. But Kaz really braced himself when he saw the faded blue eyes. The eyes were mired in hurt. Totally mired.

"That a Porsche?" Walsh asked him, motioning toward the street below. The whine in his voice, Kaz noted with dismay, went with the hurt eyes.

"No," he said. "It's a BMW 425i—"

"Nice car." Walsh was looking out the window again. "A fellow like me would love a car like that, Mr. Simic."

Kaz said nothing.

"They laid me off, Mr. Simic. Even when the tests showed I don't have leukemia. That's why they did the goddamn bone marrow tests."

"Yes, I was told—"

"Did they tell you what that means to someone like me? I got no chance out there. Nearly sixty. Know nothing from shit but driving a forklift." Walsh paused and snorted in derision. "Take a computer course, they told me."

"We're not wealthy, Charlie, but we can manage something." Kaz knew the instant he used the first name that he'd made a mistake. A huge mistake.

"Oh yeah," Walsh shouted. "Charlie this! Charlie that! Why not? Dumbshit Charlie."

"I didn't mean anything—"

"Sure you did, *Mister Simic*," Walsh said, "I know your kind."

Kaz was stunned. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, I know what to say! I'm gonna say I want one million for my bone stuff. One million, up front. D'you love your wife that much, Mr. Simic?"

"I can't get that kind of money, Mr. Walsh."

"You can get it a lot better than I can."

Kaz had tried two more meetings, followed by several phone conversations with Walsh. Then the specialist called to say that any more delay might be unfortunate for Laura.

But Charlie Walsh wouldn't listen, wouldn't lower his price, wouldn't agree to installments. Nothing worked. The world had treated Charlie Walsh shabbily and for this Laura was going to pay with her life...

Kaz pulled his attention back to the conference room.

"Our legal position is still not totally clear," Fenton continued, "I mean, since the Diana Code was adopted. We claim our electronic eyeballs are not covered—"

"You'll pay regardless of any legal action?"

"As I said, we pay the balance immediately, Mr. Simic."

"And it's a delayed airing?" Kaz asked.

"Absolutely! We edit everything in *The Lance Packer Show*," Fenton seemed keen to emphasize this point. "Mr. Packer insists on this."

So, the SleazeMeister has some scruples? Kaz wondered.

In any event, the interview was over, the die was cast. Kaz signed a sheaf of papers that he barely read, unusual for him, and pocketed his advance check.

Over to you, Cozi Knugel, he vowed grimly as he left. This was no time to develop an appetite for morality, or ethics, or a need for justification. Forget that Cozi Knugel, his onetime boss and sometime friend, had done nothing to him to deserve the supreme *dump*

Kaz was setting up for him. Forget all that!

No matter that Cozi was a predatory, self-indulgent, totally arrogant prick. No matter that Cozi believed rules were made for the rest of the world, and not for him. No matter ...because these really weren't the reasons pushing Kaz into blazing his friend.

He *needed* quick money and Cozi spelled quick money.

THE EYE AND TOOTH WORK WERE done on an outpatient basis. Kaz made up a phony story about being held over in New York so that his added three-day absence for the procedure, not to mention the eye patch, wouldn't spook Laura. He knew she would be violently opposed to the entire crazy plan.

Kaz had simply told her that Charlie had come down dramatically in his price. Laura was so overcome with gratitude that she wanted to phone Charlie Walsh with her thanks. Kaz lied his way out of that by saying Charlie was taking a short vacation before going into hospital for the bone marrow transfer.

Getting used to single-eyed vision was totally another thing.

Kaz was devastated by the resulting loss in his depth perception. He was terrified that his days as a top fashion photographer might well be over. He begged off a major assignment, saying he wanted a week to get over a flu bug and waited, in a complete funk, for his eye graft to heal at a hotel near JFK Airport.

Curiously, the job he'd ducked was with Cozi Knugel's fashion

house. Kaz had done many major contracts with Cozi Knugel over the years since he had branched out on his own. It had been Cozi's interest and support that had raised Kaz into the top dozen of fashion cameramen.

Kaz had known of *The Lance Packer Show's* interest in Knugel for several months. They had approached him earlier for a "research interview," which Kaz had turned down flatly. Now, whatever convictions he had felt earlier about dumping on a friend had dissipated in the face of "The Great Necessity."

Cozi Knugel was a German citizen who spent most of his working and playing life in North America—New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto, where he maintained a home. He was the son of a storied Luftwaffe fighter ace who flew during World War II. Cozi had inherited the arrogance and supreme confidence of the father along with his fantastic good looks.

Even though he was in his late fifties, Cozi Knugel stopped the conversation in any room he walked into. His fabulously successful fashion house was the leader in the "hooker chic" look he'd made so popular in the mid-nineties.

"All the world's my oyster," Cozi liked to say. Too often.

He collected experiences and happenings like his father had collected kills. When "commercial" climbing expeditions began on Mt. Everest, it was only a matter of time before Cozi "summitted" the highest piece of real estate on earth. This accomplishment in 2001, thoroughly chronicled on all the tab

shows, had been marred when Cozi left a climbing companion to die just above the Hilary Step on the Nepal side of the mountain.

Cozi Knugel's uncaring explanation, aired on international television, about why he'd left his rope partner in the Death Zone above 25,000 feet, had shocked Kaz. To him, and most of the climbing fraternity, it was sheer betrayal. Now it was providing him part of his own rationale for betraying his longtime relationship with the man. Betrayal involved calling up the fashion leader and getting an invitation, freely given by a surprised Cozi, to his next pool bash in Toronto.

When Kaz arrived at Cozi's 3,000 square meter home on Post Road in Toronto, he was holding, shakily, onto his mission. He parked his BMW beside a collection of automotive exotica in the large parking area, screened off from the main house by cedar hedges. It looked like he was the last arrival at tonight's festivities.

"Okay, Simic," Lance Packer's voice suddenly boomed within his head, "We're going to cut transmission now until you clear security."

"Right," Kaz said dazedly. "Can you drop the volume a notch?"

"Yeah...okay," Packer grumbled.

Kaz had to steady himself twice as he walked to the entrance foyer of the vast house. His balance was affected by one-eyed vision. In the short training period he had had with Fenton, Kaz learned how to minimize this loss. *The Lance Packer Show* was interested in escaping detection from any source, particularly from conspicuous loss of any

physical capacity in their paparazzi.

There was a glass-roofed atrium in the center of the house with vast wings running off it in three directions. Kaz was met by a doorman, an unsmiling Asian, who carefully checked a clipboard in his hand and then directed Kaz to step through an elaborate detection gate. Following this, the man carefully "swept" Kaz with a hand wand. Kaz held his breath, hoping Fenton had been right about the detectability of the implants. The doorman was thorough in his check, but finally he stepped back.

"That's fine, Mr. Simic," the man said with a slight trace of accent. "This will be the last time you are identified by name this evening." Then he handed a short black face mask to Kaz. On the top of the mask there was painted a small white number five. "Please wear this," the man added. "You will be more comfortable with it."

"Like this?" Kaz pressed the mask to his face and removed his hand. The mask stayed firmly in place, covering the upper part of his face, held there by strategically placed adhesive patches.

"Very good," the doorman said with a brief smile. "It will even stay put under water."

They walked across the marble floored foyer toward an archway leading to one of the wings of the house. Kaz could hear music and the sound of laughter.

Lance Packer's voice in his head broke in again. "We're back, Simic. Nod if I'm coming through clear enough."

Kaz nearly stumbled. He looked

without thinking at his guide to see if he'd heard Packer. The man smiled back at him, clearly oblivious to any voice in Kaz's head. He stopped and pointed to an archway.

"Please join Mr. Knugel and his other guests," he said.

"Stop overreacting, Simic," Packer admonished him.

Kaz stepped into a low-ceilinged room and was instantly transported in memory back to a Bavarian bar he and Laura had visited outside Munich years before. The wood panels and ceiling beams looked completely authentic, as did the rest of the furnishings. Kaz gazed about in wonder.

"Yes, yes!" Cozi Knugel shouted from the bar, "they are absolutely the real thing, my friend."

He approached Kaz and shook his hand warmly. "I had the original dismantled and brought here. Do you like it?"

Cozi was wearing a golden mask with the number one painted in the center of the forehead. It went with the zippered gold flight suit he was wearing. He put his arm around Kaz's shoulder and led him to the bar where three informally dressed men in numbered black masks stood.

"According to the rules of our little club," Cozi began, "No faces, no names. Friend number two, meet friend five..."

The three other guests moved forward, drinks in hand, to shake Kaz's hand. Two of them, he observed, had reached the boisterous stage but he had little time to study them.

Packer's voice was growling



again in his head. "Don't look away, Simic! Keep the eye steady on their faces. I don't care if they got masks on. We got a good chance of identifying them. Steady on the faces."

"Okay," Kaz said aloud.

Cozi looked at him with a startled smile on his face.

"Okay?" he asked, puzzled for the moment. Then he said. "Yes, yes. It is okay, my friend. This is very okay! Right?"

He laughed in his golden baritone and pulled Kaz to the bar. Kaz ordered a screwdriver, very light on the vodka. The bartender stopped and looked to Cozi Knugel for directions.

"Correction, number five," Cozi roared, "We are all drinking sledgehammers tonight." The rest of the guests shouted approval and Kaz felt trapped. Normally he was a light drinker. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been drunk. The bartender poured the drink and pushed the glass across the bar toward him. Kaz didn't move. There was an awkward silence.

"Go along with it, you asshole," Packer snapped in his head,

One of the guests, a short round man in a Blue Jays jacket, laughed and swept up Kaz's drink from the bar and brought it to him.

"Don't poop on our little party, number five," he said with mock severity, but his eyes glittered through the eyeholes of his mask.

Kaz pulled himself together. He took the glass and raised it. "To our little party," he proposed and took a long drink. Everyone cheered.

"Jesus!" Packer came in again. "Don't get drunk, Simic. Dump it in

a flowerpot, or whatever. Just don't get drunk!"

Cozi wrapped his arm around Kaz's shoulder again as the rest of the group returned to the bar.

"I didn't know we had a parallel interest my friend," he began in a quiet and serious tone. "After all these years? I was surprised when you called—"

"More ways than one to swing," Kaz threw in.

"Yes, yes!" Cozi enthused. "I have underestimated you, my friend."

The evening and boisterous level progressed rapidly. Kaz made inane conversation with the rest of the guests. It was strange how little worthwhile you find to talk about when you are desperate to hide your identity. One man, number three, the quietest of the group, started to recount an anecdote to Kaz that very nearly gave his identity away.

"Oh my God," number three stopped suddenly, "What am I saying?"

"Forget it—" Kaz started to reassure him.

"Forget it, be damned!" Packer interjected. "Stay with him, Simic. This guy, if I'm right, practically owns a major bank."

Number three's embarrassment was mercifully ended when Cozi announced to one and all that their "other" guests had arrived and it was "pool time."

They filed out of the transplanted Bavarian bar to a glassed in viewing area overlooking a large pool and spa. Easy chairs were arranged along the glass and another bar,

more modest this time, filled the back wall.

Kaz's attention was drawn to the pool.

"Pan it slowly," Packer directed him. "An establishing shot. Left to right."

Kaz did as he was directed. There were four young boys, barely into their teen years, running around the pool clad in brightly colored Spandex swim trunks. They were joined by two smaller youths entering from a door across the pool.

"Yes, yes," Cozi Knugel said. "This is nice?"

He got supportive murmurs from the rest of the masked men. Cozi rapped on the glass and the boys turned, as one, and waved gaily to the gallery. Kaz felt a sick mix of apprehension and disgust begin to build at the pit of his stomach. He tried to tell himself that this was life, that it takes all kinds and practices—but the disgust stayed with him.

His feelings strengthened when he saw that the boys wore makeup and were obviously posing provocatively for the benefit of the gallery. One youngster, perhaps ten years old, made a pathetically roguish face and blew them a kiss. Kaz started to turn away from it.

"Stay with it, Simic!" the Sleaze-Meister buzzed in his head.

Kaz brought his eyes back to the pool scene. Two of the older boys were now simulating a sex act on the diving board. There was a hoot of appreciation from the gallery. My God, Kaz thought, where do these kids come from? Where do these men come from?

Cozi opened the sliding door to

the pool and shouted, "Bottoms up!"

Promptly the kids wriggled out of their bathing trunks and began another frenetic burst of activity, chasing each other in and out of the water, jumping off the diving board, watching the men out of the corners of their eyes.

"Beee-utiful," Packer breathed in Kaz's head. "Stay with it."

With a sudden jolt, Kaz now saw that two of the "boys" were really girls, so young that their tiny breasts hadn't registered to his single eye. He felt the bile rise in his throat.

"We flew these little beauties in from South America," Cozi announced. Kaz immediately thought of Knugel's gold corporate jet, a Canadair Challenger with worldwide range. Of course, that would be the way to keep it discreet and hidden. It would be easy to bring these kids in and out of the country with no one being the wiser.

Cozi turned to the men. "Shall we join them?" he asked. "You'll find towels and bathing trunks, if you need them, in the dressing room. *Bon appetit.*"

Kaz held back so that he was the last to go. There were individual change cubicles in the dressing room and Kaz sat back in his cubicle and closed his eyes. He didn't know which bothered him most. Distaste for what he had witnessed so far or profound distaste for what might come next. An overwhelming sense of foreboding filled him, nearly robbing him of movement.

"Better get going," a voice warned him. It took him a moment to realize that it was Fenton speaking, good

old gray Fenton, the cookie-cutter. Still, Kaz felt better that Fenton was there also with Packer in the control booth at the studios just off Times Square.

He rose and went out to the pool. Most of his party were there already and two of the men were in the pool having a splash fight with the kids. Kaz noted with relief that the rest of the guests had chosen to wear their trunks.

His host was talking to one of his Asian staff members, his rock-hard and deeply tanned body fully displayed by the briefest of thongs. He looked, Kaz thought, like a Greek athlete as depicted in the ancient murals of the Olympic Games. He looked completely at home in his practically unclothed state. As if it was the most natural thing in the world. Kaz stepped to the bar and accepted another sledgehammer from the bartender.

Lance Packer spoke up sharply within his head, "I warned you, Simic—"

"Get off my ass!" Kaz snapped in front of the startled bartender. He made an airy "forget it" swing of his hand to the man and moved unsteadily to an extended pool chair by the diving board.

"Listen up, Packer," he murmured as he sat down. "I'm going to deliver, but I'm sure as hell not going to love this, or love you—"

"Just deliver, asshole," the SleazeMeister cut him off.

Kaz waited for more. It didn't come because Cozi Knugel was approaching, leading the smallest of the children by the hand.

"I want for you to meet, Shari,"

he said. "Isn't she adorable, number five?"

The child's huge brown eyes were on him, speculatively, going-on-eighteen in their knowing. She would be perhaps seven or eight, Kaz thought, barely out of her baby fat, pouty lips artfully touched up, finger and toenails painted a plumy red.

Kaz found her deadly.

"Hello, Shari," he greeted her.

"Allo," she said in a small voice.

Kaz saw that the child was a product, schooled in every provocation and wile, disturbing...and enchanting. Without hesitation she let go Cozi's hand and climbed up on Kaz's lap. She curled up with her head on his chest, and closed her eyes. Her sleepiness was possibly the only authentic thing about her, Kaz thought.

His first inclination was to push her off his lap. Then he realized Packer would be hungry to record every move, every salacious detail of this encounter.

"Have you read Nabokov, number five?" Cozi pulled another chair beside Kaz and sat down. He reached out and stroked Shari's hair gently. "Strange, the fascination the very young hold for us."

Kaz remembered reading Nabokov's *Lolita*. He had found it disturbing and unpleasant reading. Just as he found a strange naked child on his lap disturbing...and mostly unpleasant.

"There are depths in each of us that defy knowing, number five," Cozi continued. "Perhaps these are depths that should not have been explored by Mr. Nabokov."

"Why?" Kaz asked. "Because Nabokov's middle-aged 'hero' actually found his actions to be evil in the end?"

"Possibly. But remember, the child on your lap will probably earn the largest dowry in her village tonight." Cozi took his hand away and sat back, "Don't ask questions, my friend. Just enjoy. Yes?"

"Yeah, sure," Kaz pressed on. "But maybe I'll find something evil like Nabokov's man did?"

He knew he shouldn't have said it. He saw the smile harden on the fashion designer's face. Kaz had encountered this hardness before in the man, over the years, seen his exploitation of people and situations, his complete ruthlessness. Always with that smile.

"Jee-sus, Simic." Packer moaned in the back of his head.

But Cozi only laughed. "Evil? As opposed to good? Yes, yes. But these are human constructs. Completely false, my friend."

"My friend, you say?" Kaz blurted on. "As in 'friendly' rope partner on a mountain top? Is that what you mean, Cozi?"

It was vodka-fed perversity. Kaz recoiled from his own stupidity. He would never have had the guts to tangle with Cozi Knugel sober. So why now? What the hell was he trying to do?

Cozi laughed again. "You forget the rules, number five. No names tonight." He reached forward again and stroked Shari's hair. Suddenly he was very serious. "Anyway ...things become very clear on mountain tops, number five."

Kaz noticed out of the corner of

his good eye that one of the hard-faced Asians was trying to get Cozi's attention. He also noted a hard bulge under the left armpit of the guard's jacket. These guys could play rough, he warned himself.

"Ciao," Knugel said when he saw the man and moved to him.

"God damn it, Simic!" The Sleaze *Meister* broke into Kaz's tangled thoughts. "What are you trying to prove? I'll do all the moralizing on this show—"

"You can't even spell the word, Packer."

"Up your ass!"

Kaz was watching Cozi Knugel's face as he listened to the security man. His face was settling into that hard brittle smile Kaz knew so well.

"Got to go, sweetheart," he muttered drunkenly to Packer.

Cozi was now nodding firmly as the security man spoke. Finally, he turned from the man and clapped his hands for silence.

"Yes, yes," he began, "Everybody out of the pool, please."

There was a laughing, grudging compliance and soon the entire group was gathered about the diving board and Kaz's chair. Shari had stirred on his lap when Knugel called out, but she settled back to sleep. Kaz finished his drink, savoring its fiery plunge down his throat, and then he carefully placed the empty glass on the tiled pool deck.

Where in the hell was this evening going?

"My people tell me there is an electronic signal leaving this house," Cozi said to the assembled group. "It is hard to believe that anyone would repay my hospitality



by spying. Yes? I think, yes. But we can check this."

They would be all asked, he went on, one at a time to be scanned again by the detector. Two more security men appeared rolling out the scan gate. Kaz's eye went back to his host. The affable, charming Cozi Knugel had quite gone.

"Shall we start?" Knugel asked.

Kaz froze in terror. Now he was seeing the man who could leave a rope partner on the Everest mountainside. Now he could see the son of a father who shot down over a hundred Allied flyers in WW II.

"We'll start with the boys," Cozi said still smiling. "Through the gate, boys."

Kaz sat up in his chair and gently nudged Shari off his lap. "Turn it off, Packer," he mumbled as though he was talking to Shari. He realized with horror that he had no way of knowing if Packer would turn off his transmission.

The boys moved through the gate and then Shari joined the other girl and they both walked through hand in hand. Kaz was surprised when a dark haired woman, her eyes wide with fright, was ushered to the gate by the head guard. She must be the handler of the kids' group, Kaz thought. She walked through the gate and then was swept by the wand. Even more surprising, each of the security detail passed through the gate themselves.

Cozi Knugel now turned to the men. "Now, our guests please."

Kaz started forward ending up at the end of the line behind number three. The loud fat man, number

two, moved forward, making an unfunny show of it. He was followed unsteadily by number four. That left the two of them.

Kaz felt Knugel's eyes on him, hard, cold, mountain top eyes.

"My God, Packer!" Kaz said without moving his lips. "Are we off the air?"

Mocking silence was his answer. Kaz's mind went icy in spite of the false bravado of the liquor he'd drunk. Had the Sleaze *Meister* killed the connection? Or was he counting on recording a weird "snuff" scene with him, Kaz Simic, as the subject? He could see the show's ratings skyrocketing on his lurid departure.

He pulled his attention back to the pool. Number three was speaking earnestly to Cozi Knugel.

"I didn't think about my pacemaker," he said with a nervous laugh.

"A pacemaker?" Cozi sounded unbelieving, "But why didn't we pick it up at the start?"

"This model transmits only every ten minutes," number three explained. "To a monitoring service."

"And we missed it?"

"I guess so. Sorry."

Relief began to flood Kaz, He could have hugged the confused figure standing in line before him. But he wasn't prepared for the fashion designer's next move.

"Yes, yes," Cozi roared. "Let us see. Come through. Come through!"

Number three stepped hesitantly through the gate. Immediately there was an angry electronic buzzing and everyone began laughing.

"One pacemaker registered,"

## 32 A Slope So Slippery

Cozi Knugel shouted. "Now you, number five. What surprises do you have?"

Kaz tried to bluff it, spreading his arms and doing a tipsy pirouette. Everyone laughed again, but Cozi was not to be denied.

"Come through, number five," he ordered.

As happened in the bar earlier, everything went silent. God. How long ago had that been, Kaz thought?

He cleared his throat, his mind in a whirl. What do you do now? Reach up and take your mask off? Make a clean breast of it? He felt as though he was being drawn into a whirlpool, a vortex of deception. His lies, Cozi's lies, everyone else's lies in this cavernous room, stinking of chlorine and filled with sleaze and shivering painted kids, all of it pulled at him.

Kaz took a deep breath and walked into the gate, expecting an angry wasp's nest of sound. But it didn't come. There wasn't even a hint of sound.

Instantly everyone was slapping him on the back and congratulating him. It was weird, the palpable relief of everyone. They all seemed bonded by a sense of guilt and deception. It brought an instant moment of camaraderie, a sharing of the guilt, perhaps? It lasted for only a moment, then the bartender circulated with a fresh round of drinks.

The pool bash cranked up again.

Kaz wove his way back to his chair and dropped onto it, prickles of nervous perspiration springing to his chest and armpits.

"Thanks," he said through his

teeth.

"You can thank Fenton for that, Simic," the Sleaze *Meister* answered him promptly. "What happened?"

Kaz was about to answer when Shari reappeared and climbed back onto his lap. He was reminded that this monstrous evening was far from over.

Sometime later he felt a small moist hand slip under his bathing trunks.

Kaz recoiled groggily. "Don't do that..."

THE NEXT MORNING, KAZ PICKED up the messages on his business phone in the studio. Laura was still sleeping upstairs, well out of earshot. He had spent the early hours of the morning sleeping off the vodka in his BMW in the cedar lined parking lot at Cozi Knugel's monster house on Post Road.

He dimly remembered leaving the house. What had happened after the final screening by the detector was disturbingly blurred to him. In fact, he was terrified to think what might have happened.

He did remember Fenton talking him out of the house, guiding him to the BMW. Good gray old Fenton, every drunk's friend, every feckless paparazzi's savior.

Kaz fumbled with the answering machine on his desk. The first message was from Laura's brother. He had located a medical clinic that would cooperate in an unwilling bone marrow "donation." They would even supply the knockout pills to get the donor subject to their establishment...

Kaz made a face in irritation.

The second message was from Charlie Walsh.

Kaz waited as the phone rang in Walsh's room. He was about to hang up on the fifth ring when Charlie answered blearily.

"Hi, Charlie," Kaz said into the phone. "Kaz Simic. You called me last night?"

"Oh yeah," Charlie said, "I been thinking, Mr. Simic, and the more I think, the more I'm against—"

"What are you against, Charlie?"

"The whole thing," Charlie started to whine. "Like, a friend told me it hurts like hell to give bone stuff... and I really got to thinking—"

"Charlie! We made a deal. I'll

have the money this afternoon. All cash, man!"

"Not good enough, Mr. Simic. We have to rethink this whole thing. I gotta have more—"

Kaz's head began to spin.

"Okay, okay, Charlie," he said slowly, "I'll get back to you. I promise, I'll get back to you within an hour."

Kaz put the phone down quietly. He had a wild urge to laugh, but he resisted because it might wake Laura. He stared at the wall for a long moment thinking how far he had come in the last week.

Then he reached for the phone and dialed Laura's brother. 🍁

## Goodbye, Keith

Keith Scott died at home in Toronto on Wednesday, November 17th, 1999 in his 79th year. I never got to meet him in person, but we sent countless e-mails back and forth between Edmonton and Toronto over the years as we discussed everything from one of his current story submissions to flying in small planes to advances in laser surgery for eyes.

We first saw Keith's talent when he sent us his story "Water," which appeared in our Fall 1991 issue and in our anthology, *On Spec: The First Five Years*. It's funny: even though we don't accept submissions over 6000 words, "Water" was so well-written, we didn't care. Come to think about it, I don't think we even *noticed*.

I knew Keith was in his late seventies, and I knew he was very ill. News of his death still came as a shock, and I was deeply saddened. But when I told Susan MacGregor, editor of the *Divine Realms* anthology, she said: "I met him at the *Divine Realms* launch in Toronto. He was a true sweetheart, and I'm glad to have met him. I feel he was an inspiration—not just with his writing, but how he approached life and everyone he met. Sometimes, when people get old, the crap has all fallen away, and you feel that they are completely real and human and vulnerable and strong at the same time when you meet them. I hope I can be like that some day. I'm sad to hear he's gone, but on the other hand, I also see death as a release, so a lot of that sadness is tempered by a faith/intuitive feeling that he's within a greater and more meaningful reality. So I'm glad of that. I remember his 'gold' and I don't think that part of him dies. Ever."

My editors and I are pleased and proud to have been able to showcase some of that gold, and share it with you. Fly high, Keith.

—Jena Snyder

*No bone had ever held its secret from Natalie before.  
Why was this one so different?*

# The Echo of Bones

Rebecca M. Senese

IT HAD BEEN A DRY SPRING, A BLESSING AFTER THE cold, damp winter. Leaves crunched under my feet like brittle bones. I pushed the image from my mind as I followed the constable through the woods.

It had never been this dry so early, at least not when I was a young girl vacationing with my family along these shores. But if it hadn't been so dry, the boy wouldn't have been allowed to play with his dog in the woods behind their cottage. Too much mud usually, the mother said. But with such nice weather...

With such nice weather the boy's dog had managed to dig up the remains of a shattered skull.

Through the trees, I spotted the familiar yellow shimmer of a police barricade. The force field opaqued the area from prying eyes and stopped further contamination of a crime scene. Odd to see such an adult feature in a landscape that belonged to my childhood.

I pulled my dark hair back and secured it in a pony tail. Reaching the perimeter, the constable handed me a wafer-thin containment suit. With practiced ease, I slipped into it, ignoring his surprised look. I knew he thought I was a crank but his opinion didn't matter. Bone reading might not be admissible in court but it definitely had its uses.

I slid the faceguard into place as the constable triggered open a section of the barrier. The yellow shimmer dissolved and I caught sight of white-suited figures moving inside like ghosts. I stepped through, heading for the one whose suit looked like it was about to burst.

Mitchell turned as I reached him. The faceguard did nothing to hide his grim expression.

"Just bones, Natalie." He gestured, causing the arm seams to tear slightly



around his bicep.

Past him, I saw O'Donnell, the forensic anthropologist, already squatting by a pile of disarticulated bones. Pieces, mostly. I recognized the chewed edge of a long bone, probably a femur. The face of the skull was smashed, leaving the barest trace of the upper ridge of the optical orbits.

"Any teeth left?" I asked O'Donnell.

He glanced up, thick glasses magnifying his eyes. "None. Probably removed to prevent identification."

"What can you tell so far?" Mitchell asked.

"All I've got are rough guesses."

Mitchell waved impatiently. "Yeah, yeah."

O'Donnell shrugged. "Okay. I'd say it's been here since the fall. There isn't much new growth around the bones, just what's started so far this spring. If it had been last summer, the boy might have found them before his parents closed the cottage for the winter, so I'm thinking fall."

"Can you sex it yet?" I asked.

"I'll have to take it to the lab. No pelvis. Probably taken by scavenging animals." A smile crossed his face. "You'd probably be able to tell more than me."

Around us, a couple of the constables snickered. Mitchell silenced them with a glare. I appreciated his support but it didn't stop the jokes or hostility. Even after Dr. Fredric Desmond had authenticated the existence of high emotional electrostatic energy and created his detector to measure levels after death,

most people didn't put much stock in bone readers. The emotional energy dissipated quickly, within a week after a highly emotional incident such as violent death. But bones held echoes, too minute to be measured even by the sensitive Desmond tracking equipment. It took a human bone reader with a special ability, honed to perfection, to hear the delicate echoing whisper of bones.

I was reluctant to do a reading under such skeptical glares but it was always better to read a bone in its natural resting place. Of course, Mitchell noticed my hesitation. He knew me too damned well.

"If you're finished, doc, Detective Morgan can do an initial reading now."

O'Donnell nodded and stood up. I glared briefly at Mitchell. He was too disciplined to grin but I noticed that devilish twinkle in his eye. His teasing look but I knew him just as well.

"Thanks, Denny," I whispered, too low for others to hear. Mitchell scowled at the hated abbreviation of his name.

As O'Donnell stepped away, I took his place inside the perimeter around the bones. The vegetation had been cleared to expose the bones fully, but not before the technicians had taken numerous pictures, videos and holos of the area. Boy, I couldn't wait to review those.

"I'll work on the long bone," I announced, pulling off the thin glove. On my left, a technician aimed his camera at me. They needed to keep track of what I

touched, to record potential contamination.

I took a deep breath, smelling the fresh, wet earth, the heavy musk of old grass and the crisp, freshness of new buds filtered through the faceguard. Peaceful. I allowed the calmness to center me before I reached for the bone.

It felt smooth in my fingers, slightly grainy from the dirt. I traced some slight irregularities, coming across a small nick, perhaps from an old injury. Or a new one. I pushed such speculations from my mind. I wasn't here to think. Only to listen.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated on breathing, on listening. Wind rustled the leaves, boots crunched on the ground. My heart beat a steady rhythm in my ears, and beneath that...beneath...

A whisper. Soft. A sigh on the wind. Now a room, vague, ill-defined. Shadows. Perspiration dampened my forehead, beaded on my cheeks as I concentrated. Fragments, only fragments. But that couldn't be right. The only bones that held echoes so weak were thousands of years old. These bones couldn't possibly be that age.

I breathed, listening, struggling to bring the room into focus. Someone else was there, a suggestion only, no physical definition. I frowned. The acrid odor of fear. The sharp, white-noise of pain.

My fingers trembled as I released the bone. Beneath the containment suit, my shirt stuck to my back, drenched with sweat. My heart thudded in my ears, pounding with effort. I fumbled a tissue out of my pocket, wiped my forehead.

"Anything?" Mitchell asked behind me, his voice tight.

"Not much, Dennis." My voice trembled. I took a breath to steady it. "I'll write it up. Possibly I'll get more when we take it inside."

Stepping back from the bones, I was aware of the amused looks only half hidden. I ignored them, struggling to slip the glove back on. Naturally, they were easy to get on the first time, but a bitch the second.

"Tough break, Natalie," O'Donnell said. "But you can't read them all."

As he turned to supervise the packing up of the remains, I clenched my teeth. This had never happened before, not to me. I'd always been able to read bones the way some people were born with perfect pitch. There had never been any bone that had held its secret from me.

Frowning, I watched them lift the skull gently from the forest floor.

BONE READING RAN IN MY FAMILY, who considered it almost a sacred tradition. Much to my mother's dismay, I'd shunned the family vocation and entered police college after my father's death. My older sister had already gone into archeology. I thought I could make a better contribution by helping the living. I'd downplayed my family background, but when your mother has been involved in piecing together detailed histories of several Egyptian pharaohs as well as reading the bones of JFK, it's hard to go unnoticed. Most of my fellow cops thought I was a joke and acted accordingly. Several were downright

hostile, and only a few had ever approached anything close to respect. Fortunately for me, my partner was one of them.

I followed Mitchell toward the pathologist's lab. Mitchell didn't walk as much as swoop down a hallway, barreling through anything in his way. Since he was the size of a small mountain, not many people made that mistake. I followed in his wake like a tumbleweed.

"Acid," Harrison, the pathologist, announced as Mitchell and I walked in. "Our perpetrator was trying to destroy the skeleton, or at least make identification difficult. Hence the removal of the teeth and the bashing of the cranium."

Mitchell turned away from the autopsy table that held the bones and followed his arms. Muscles bulged in his shirt. "Can you piece together the skull?"

"O'Donnell is working on it," Harrison said. "He should know in a couple of hours if he can salvage anything. The hole in the occipital bone matches the exit wound from a projectile gun. And there's cut marks at the joints, indicative of dismemberment."

"Charming. What about DNA?" Mitchell asked.

"We've done some extractions from the femur." The pathologist moved a gloved finger over the bone, pointing out the new incision. "If we're lucky, we can get DNA from the marrow if the acid didn't penetrate too far and completely destroy it, but it's going to take awhile to get the results. The usual backlog. I sent one sample three weeks ago and they're still stalling.

I think they lost the damned thing. They're so..."

"And if the acid destroyed the DNA?" I interrupted.

The pathologist shrugged his narrow shoulders. "We've also found indications of deformity, maybe some kind of genetic disorder. I'm running a search through our medical databases. Not all the unusual pitting is from the acid, but the damage is even making that difficult to trace."

He ran a gloved finger over a cracked humerus. I stared at the bones lying on the gleaming steel table. So many secrets locked inside. A lifetime. I should be able to unlock them, to bring them into the light, but I hadn't been able to. I hadn't tried again since the initial discovery three days ago, but I knew I probably wouldn't be able to glean anything more.

And what did that tell me?

"He wasn't just trying to stop identification," I said.

"What do you think, Natalie?" Mitchell took a step closer, towering over me. His gray eyes bored into me, willing me to think harder.

"He was trying to fragment the bone charge, destroy any residual memory."

Harrison turned away. I recognized disbelief in his movements but I didn't care what he thought. He didn't have any say in the handling of this case. Mitchell had the lead, and he was listening.

"You think the perp knew enough to do that?" he asked.

"This wasn't an accident," I said. "They've tried every other way to muddle identification but there's

residual memory, even in ashes. Sure it's damaged but not like this. This was on purpose. I bet they've been exposed to some kind of electrical charge."

"So how many people know about bone reading?" Mitchell said.

I shrugged. "It's not exactly a widely recognized forensic science, not like the Desmond tracker." Harrison snickered, covered it with a cough. I ignored him.

"Some universities, criminologists, other law enforcement agencies. Even with the success of such readings as those done at archeological sites and on dead celebrities, most of the public doesn't think of it in terms of forensics."

Mitchell chewed his lower lip, the signal that he was thinking. "How long for the DNA, doc?"

"Call me tomorrow," Harrison said.

"Let's go talk to O'Donnell," I said, "then I've got an idea."

O'DONNELL POINTED AT THE generic human head that floated above the desktop. "I always like to start with a blank head, kind of like a blank slate."

I smiled politely at his joke. Behind me, Mitchell grunted. O'Donnell pushed his glasses up his nose and turned back to the computer keyboard.

"Right. I scanned the entire skull into the computer. We can tell a lot, even when the maxilla and nasal bones have been removed. The shape of what's remaining of the orbits help us with the mapping and the Central Forensic Database confirms our conclusions and fills in the

rest using comparison equations."

As he talked, he touched several keys and the holo image of the head began to change shape. The cheekbones sharpened, the chin narrowed. Eyes peered out from beneath delicate brows. Muscle layered overtop, creating more human features. Skin completed the transformation. A final keystroke and the face looked out at us with a soulful gaze.

A woman, maybe in her fifties. Hard to know for sure. Would she have wrinkled around the eyes in precisely that way? O'Donnell hit another key and hair appeared, shifting through several different styles.

"What's the accuracy?" Mitchell asked.

"With such extensive damage, only ninety percent." O'Donnell sounded apologetic.

Mitchell snorted. "Pretty pathetic."

O'Donnell fidgeted with his glasses. "I know, I'm sorry."

"Don't listen to him," I said. "You're sure it's female?"

"Eighty-five percent probability," O'Donnell said. "The DNA will tell you for sure. Talk to Harrison about that."

"Can we get a copy?" I gestured at the holo.

He loaded it onto a chip that I tucked into my pocket. As the door slid closed behind us, I pinched Mitchell's arm.

He jumped. "Ouch! What's that for?"

"For scaring him. All they see is your ugly face; they don't know you're a comedian."

He pouted with great exaggeration but gave it up when he saw I was ignoring him. "You said you had an idea."

"I do, but we'll need special permission."

WHILE MITCHELL BLITZED THE MEDIA with copies of the holo, I petitioned the courts for a release. It took two days but finally they gave me custody of a two-centimeter piece of the femur. Harrison had already used it in his DNA tests. So far there was no match in the public databases and it always took time to convince the corporations to search theirs. Meanwhile, I was going to try another bone reading.

I tightened the clamps that held the fragment in place, careful not to touch it directly. Even through wafer gloves I would sense something and I didn't want any layering in my reading. This was going to be tricky enough.

"Are you sure this will work?" Mitchell reclined in a worn plastic chair. He leaned farther back, causing the chair to creak in protest.

"It can't hurt," I said. "A brief electrical current of the right amperage might restore some of the echo. We don't really know how bones hold memory echoes, so we can't be precisely sure how to destroy them."

I could tell I was pushing even Mitchell's faith but he merely pursed his lips. Hell, I didn't know if I believed it, but like I'd said, it couldn't hurt.

Certainly nothing else had helped. We still didn't know who she was. Our media blitz yielded

nothing but dead ends. At night in my apartment, I stared at her face floating like an apparition above my coffee table until the curve of her cheek became as familiar as my own. When staring at fragments of bone it was easy to forget they had once been a real person. The least I could do for her was give her back her name, and I'd done a poor job of it so far.

I attached the leads and made sure everything was set. Mitchell folded his arms across his barrel chest.

"All ready, Dr. Frankenstein?"

"Watch it, Igor."

I pressed the button. The leads glowed red to show they were in use, otherwise nothing much happened. I timed out five seconds, then cut the power.

Mitchell raised an eyebrow.

After unplugging the generator, I disconnected the leads and stripped off the wafer gloves. My plan was to slowly increase the amperage and the exposure time while attempting a reading between each try. Mentally, I'd decided that a thirty second exposure was my cut-off point. Chances were that if I couldn't pull something coherent out of the bone by then, it wouldn't happen.

Taking a deep breath, I sat down on the stool in front of the bone fragment. I listened to the hum of the overhead lights, allowed my breathing to match it. My fingers reached out to the bone.

I closed my eyes.

A room. Cramped. Cheap, slide-out bed. Old fashioned, audio-only phone. Neon light leaking in through the curtained window.



Lower class motel. Battered suitcase on the floor beside the dresser, a purse on the bed. She probably had identification in it, but it did me no good. I could only watch through her eyes, a silent witness to the last moments of her life.

The image held a moment longer, then fragmented. I became aware of the sweat sticking to my skin and the ache in my shoulders. My fingers felt like they were cracking as I peeled them off the bone.

"Well?" Mitchell asked.

"A beginning," I said.

I didn't get much beyond that, no matter how long or how high the current. Soon the image began to degrade, forcing me to stop. I didn't want to lose it.

For what felt like the hundredth time, I stripped off the wafer gloves. They stuck to my fingers, damn things. I wrenched them off, tearing one in half.

"A motel room," Mitchell drawled. "That's useful."

His mouth snapped shut when I glared at him. Fatigue reduced my sense of humor to zero.

"Sorry, Natalie. I know you tried your best."

I turned away from him. That had always been the problem. My best wasn't good enough. I'd never matched up to the flash and speed of my mother and older sister, Claire.

The thought was almost painful in my head, but I was too professional to ignore it. My shaky ego didn't rank against this woman's death.

"I have to make a call," I told Mitchell.



The woman who answered the vidphone was an older, more successful version of me. She wore the latest fashion, her hair molded perfectly to accentuate her cheeks. Hell, who was I kidding, even with the best clothes and hairstyle I would never match the perfection of my sister.

"Hello, Claire, is Mother there?" I asked.

One perfect eyebrow arched. "Natalie. This is a surprise. I thought you were busy saving the world."

"Sorry to interrupt your toenail-clipping, but I need to talk to Mother," I said.

Claire glared at me and I could imagine my face held the same closed expression. We had never gotten along.

"There's no reason to be rude," she said. "But you never needed a reason, did you? Your talent is wasted on you. You won't ever appreciate it or use it properly."

I bit back an angry retort as Claire turned away from the vidphone. A deep breath lowered my blood pressure as I peeled my fingers out of my chair's armrests. Thank God, they were below the viewing screen.

Mother appeared, all elegance and decorum.

"Natalie, darling."

"Hello, Mother. I have a favor to ask."

MOTHER ARRIVED IN SEDATE (FOR her) fashion. Her plush limocopter deposited her on the roof of the police station. As it took off, whipping

my hair into a frenzy, Mother moved regally across the roof to meet me. Not a hair out of place. Naturally.

I managed to guide her to my office in twenty minutes, a trip that should take five, but the officers who normally ignored or laughed at me stopped my mother for an autograph or a chat. Mother was always happy to oblige, gifted at setting people at ease in a moment. Well, most people.

As the door slid shut, I snapped on the privacy shield. The familiar background hum from the outer office faded to a heavy silence.

Mother cast an appraising look around the office, noting my bland metal desk, cheap plastic chairs and half empty coffee cups piled beside my decrepit keyboard. Finally her gaze settled on the sliver of bone resting on a cloth on my desk.

"This is what you wish me to read."

"Yes," I said. "It's from a case. I can't tell you any more."

Her hand flashed up in a dramatic gesture. "I don't want to know more." She took a step toward the bone. As always with my mother, I felt a powerful urge to look around for cameras.

"I need to know everything you see, in detail." I triggered the pin mike on my desk. "Just speak in a normal voice."

Her gray eyes flashed as she tossed her scarf over her shoulder. "I don't allow my readings to be recorded."

My cheeks flushed with anger but my voice stayed calm. "This is an official police investigation. We

keep records."

Her rigid posture told me she wanted to protest. "You called me about this."

"Yes, I did and I told you exactly what I needed. If you can't do this, I'll call someone else." I stepped toward the door. There really wasn't anyone else to call; I knew it and she knew I did, but I wasn't going to back down on this.

She sighed elaborately. "Fine. Make your recording."

She settled into the chair and began the deep breathing relaxation exercises. Her eyelids closed, the muscles of her face slackened. Her hand rested on the desk beside the fragment.

It felt strange to watch her, to not be doing it myself. It reminded me of the demonstrations she'd give me as a child when I was first learning to tap into this strange, profound talent. She always made it look so easy with none of the side effects I experienced, like fatigue or headaches.

Her fingers twitched, moved to touch the fragment. As I watched, her forehead creased as she concentrated. Was she seeing the motel room? Was she seeing more?

"Mother, what do you see?" I kept my voice soft, to prompt her to speak without losing the memory thread she was reading.

"A room. Motel. Very small, cramped. A strange place, not familiar, not home. Waiting for someone. Impatient. The room's shaking. We're pacing."

In my mind's eye, I could see the woman, pacing the narrow space between the bed and the wall.

"What else?" I prompted.

Her head jerked. "Noise. The door, someone at the door. Moving toward it."

She paused and I held my breath, waiting. The woman had answered the door; letting in her killer? Could my mother see well enough to describe the person? At least we'd have something to go on.

A sharp intake of breath drew my attention. Mother's eyes snapped open. She jerked away from the bone. The chair toppled to the floor, landing with a crash as she jumped to her feet. Her lipstick shone blood red against her white face.

"Mom, are you okay?" I touched her arm tentatively. She suddenly looked old, lines etching across her skin, following the line of muscle and bone. She clutched my hand. Her desperate stare unnerved me.

"Mom, what is it? What did you see?"

She blinked and seemed to shake herself. Her hand pulled away as she stood taller. The fleeting glimpse of vulnerability faded, leaving behind her normal, crisp self-control.

"Just a shock," she said. "The suddenness, it startled me. I wasn't prepared."

"Can you describe the attacker?"

"No. It got very jumbled. Disruption, like you mentioned. More emotional content than visual anyway."

I frowned. I'd been hoping for more. "Why don't you rest a moment, then we can try again."

"I don't think I can." She pushed her scarf back over her shoulder. "I

don't have any more time to spare. Besides, I don't think I'll get anything else; the damage to the echo is extensive."

She brushed a wisp of gray hair from her face and I noticed her fingers trembling. The emotional outpouring had disturbed her more than she'd admitted. She'd always been so proud of her detachment but she'd rarely been consulted on such recent violent deaths. The intensity took some getting used to. I should have warned her.

"Thanks for trying," I said. Turning off the privacy shield, I began to show her out. At the door, she grabbed my shoulders and pulled me into a stiff embrace.

"I've always been proud of you, Natalie, even though you think I haven't noticed."

I was speechless all the way to the roof.

"OKAY, LET ME SUMMARIZE: A cramped motel room, a knock at the door, violent emotions. Have I missed anything?"

The french fry I whipped at Mitchell missed by a foot.

"It was worth a shot," I grumbled.

"At least we know your mother can't walk on water," Mitchell quipped.

Normally I was happy to indulge in a round of good natured parent-bashing but her visit had left me uneasy. I'd caught a glimpse of humanity beneath the icy exterior. Bashing her wasn't fun anymore; it felt shameful.

"The damage to the echo was too extensive," I said. "Do we have anything else?"

"Final reports from pathology. The usual in excruciating detail. O'Donnell even included all the metric equations for the femur and cranium to support his hypothesis on age and sex. A little light reading."

He tossed the disk to me.

"Harrison's still trying to track the DNA, promised an update within the hour." The fax machine ring interrupted him.

"There we are." Mitchell hoisted his bulk out of the chair behind his desk. It practically groaned with relief. He scanned the pages quickly, a frown building on his face.

"Dennis?"

He stared at me. "We got a match on a relative in the public service database."

He stopped. I gestured at him. "Yeah?"

"It's you."

I dropped my coffee cup. The last dregs splashed across the desk.

"What?"

He handed me the fax. I stared at the codes, a partial match, showing we'd shared a parent. That was impossible. I had only one sister.

"Run it again," I hissed.

Mitchell punched at the vidphone to call for confirmation. My fingers whitened as I clenched the paper. It had to be a mistake, someone had miskeyed the information, looked in the wrong database, misread the code.

Blood roared in my ears while I waited for Mitchell to finish. He disconnected and turned back to me, his expression carefully controlled.

"No mistake, Natalie. They confirmed."

The paper crumpled, ripping, as my fingers clenched. There had to be some explanation.

Maybe Mother's reaction to her reading wasn't from the violence of the death, maybe she recognized something. Or someone.

The room blurred. I shook my head to clear it. Mitchell's warm fingers jolted me as he tried to pry open my fists.

"Natalie, let go of the fax."

I released it, watching it crumple to my desk and start soaking up my spilled coffee. Mitchell hung on to my hands. I marveled at how warm his flesh felt, warm and alive. My fingers were shards of ice.

"Natalie, we have to work this lead. Focus on the case."

His voice, firm, reasonable, resonated inside my skull, finally allowing me to push back the icy fear. Beneath it, I felt a core of red hot anger that flushed adrenaline through my system and cleared my head. We had a job, a case. A woman was dead and I was going to know what happened.

I stood up. "I want to see the bones."

PATHOLOGY WAS CLOSED BY THE time we reached the office, but a scan of our ID implants and retinal confirmation got us waved through. I plowed down the hall as Mitchell followed. His reluctance was palatable, a sour taste on the air.

"Why can't you just try the fragment again?" he repeated for the fifth time.

"I need a larger sample, more

bone density." I pressed my hand to the palm reader by the door. The scan tickled my flesh. The door slid open and fluorescent lights winked on like a sleepy person blinking awake.

"We need to get permission for this," Mitchell insisted.

I set the case carrying the portable electrical generator on the floor by a shining steel gurney. I turned to face him.

"Do you want to leave, Dennis? If you go now you won't be breaking any regulations. I can do this myself."

His lips tightened. A muscle jumped along the side of his jaw. "Dammit, Natalie."

"I'm doing this. Stay or don't."

Tension, thick as fog, stretched between us. I didn't want him to go; Mitchell had always been the rock I leaned against, my protection from the various blows in the office and on cases, but I had to have answers. I had to have some way of combating my fear.

His massive shoulders slumped. "Hurry up," he murmured.

I bent to open the case, blinking back sudden tears. My fingers fumbled on the latches until Mitchell's hands covered my own.

"Get what you need, I'll unpack this."

Harrison had filed her under Jane Doe. My palm print unlocked the drawer and I carefully lifted out her shattered skull. Seeing her damaged face made me wince. The image of her holo reconstruction filled my mind and I realized why it had been so easy to memorize her features; I'd been looking at similar ones in

the mirror my whole life.

Carrying her skull to the gurney, I could already feel impressions filtering into my consciousness. Quickly, I attached leads to the generator and pasted them onto the skull.

"I need the rubber mat too," I told Mitchell.

He pulled it out of the case and laid it on the gurney. I placed the skull on top, checked the generator a final time, then powered up.

I counted off a twenty second burst, then shut down. Even as I peeled the leads off the occipital bone I could feel the echo was stronger. My fingers trembled.

I took a shuddering breath, nodded to Mitchell, and closed my eyes.

THE MOTEL ROOM, IN SHARPER focus. Cracked plaster along the door frames betrays the age and class of the place but it's something we're used to. We understand the bottom because we've been scrounging all our lives. But that's about to end.

Pacing, pacing, impatient. A knock echoes like a cannon blast. Sharp relief and eager anticipation. No more cheap rooms like this.

The door, old fashioned, with a knob and hinges that we have to turn and pull to open. The hallway beyond: dark, ominous. The figure in the doorway wears a large dark coat with a deep hood. A glimpse of porcelain skin glints in the hood folds.

We step back to allow entrance. The figure steps forward, raising a hand. A gun. The lightning flash of



panic does not obscure the final glimpse of the porcelain face in the hood.

That face. Oh so familiar.  
The pain obliterates us.

“NATALIE!”

Mitchell’s voice was a bare squeak against the wailing of my pounding head. I became aware of the floor, cold against my back, my legs, my arms. Why was the room dark? Then I realized my eyes were closed.

Light poured in like molten lava, tearing my eyes madly and igniting a new pulse of agony in my head. I groaned.

Mitchell helped me sit up. I leaned against the expanse of his shoulder.

“What happened?” I whispered.

“You screamed and passed out. I’ve been trying to wake you for almost ten minutes.” His voice whined in near panic.

“I’m okay. Help me up.”

I struggled to my feet, bracing myself against the gurney. My legs trembled, threatening to spill me again but I promised them a soothing bath, massage, hot oil, whatever to keep me upright. Begrudgingly, they complied.

“What did you see?” Mitchell asked.

Surprisingly, now that I knew, I wasn’t afraid or even angry. I didn’t feel anything but numb.

“The motel room,” I said. “She was expecting someone. There was a knock at the door and she opens it. A figure in a dark coat and hood comes in and shoots her.”

“That’s it? Nothing else?”

“Oh there’s something else. Everything else. I saw a face.”

“Who?” he demanded.

“My sister, Claire,” I said.

MY MOTHER’S HOUSE WAS THE essence of seclusion; built into the side of a mountain, surrounded on three sides by fifty acres of forest with the ocean on the fourth. Access was by a private road that wound through the trees unless you had a limocopter to land on the roof pad.

Being lowly detectives, Mitchell and I only had access to a regular groundcar. I stared out at the passing trees as Mitchell drove. He always insisted on driving manually, distrustful of the computerized guidance routes that blanketed the city. Here in the country there were no guidance routes to tap into and I was grateful for his manual driving experience.

The trees parted as we drove around a curve, and the house sprang into view. With walls of brown and green, elegant sloping windows and towers shaped like trees, the house looked like it had grown out of the mountainside. I heard Mitchell’s sharp intake of breath. He’d known my mother was rich; now he saw the extent of my rebellion.

As we stepped from the car, the door slid open. Mitchell started.

“Sensor field,” I said. “Mother always has the latest gadgets. Sometimes even before the military. My DNA’s on file for full access.”

“And if it wasn’t?”

“We’d be gassed with a strong tranquilizer while the house

contacted the police.”

Mitchell blinked. “Oh.”

We entered the house and I led the way straight to the back parlor. Here the outside wall was completely transparent, affording a breathtaking view of the sea. It was my mother’s favorite room; she could survey the wilds of nature without actually letting it touch her. But the wildness had invaded anyway. Despite her best efforts.

She stood with her back to the door as we entered. I stopped just inside the doorway but she made no sign of hearing us. Of course she had; the alarm system would have notified her immediately.

“Where’s Claire?”

“She’s not here,” Mother said. “She’s been working very hard and needed a rest.”

My nails dug into my palms as I clenched my fists. Anger made me jumpy but I forced myself to be still.

“Who was she?” I growled. “We know she’s related to me. We’re going to find out.”

Finally, Mother turned to us. Stress had aged her in hours in a way the years had never done. Dark circles hung from her eyes, her cheekbones sharply defined. Even her hair lay flat in its upswept style.

“You won’t find anything,” she said. “Because we kept no records. It was a stupid, arrogant attempt. A fifty-year-old mistake that should never have happened.”

“Who?” I repeated.

She sighed the way she always did when I was being particularly stubborn. “Your sister. An experiment. My colleagues and I were so

full of ourselves then, we thought we could improve our talent. Instead we made genetic disasters. We tried splicing our genetic material, subjected it to various tests, trying to isolate and boost our bone reading ability. Most of our experiments never made it past the embryonic stage. The ones that survived full incubation died very young, not viable.” She looked away and her voice grew wistful.

“She wasn’t supposed to live past ten, not with her deformities. But I thought she deserved whatever time she had so I sent her away. I lost track of her. I never told anyone, not even your father. I never really thought...”

“She thought,” I said sourly. “She found you.”

“I received a letter. She wanted contact, money. Claire was there when I got the message and I had to tell her. We discussed it. It wouldn’t have taken much to appease her. I thought Claire agreed.”

“Claire agreed all right,” I snapped. “She agreed so much she shot our sister, dismembered her and tried to destroy her remains. Failing that, she dumped them in the woods.”

Mother’s eyes flashed. “You can’t prove that. You can’t prove any of this.”

“Where is your daughter, Ms. Morgan?” Mitchell’s deep voice carried through the room.

Her resistance evaporated. Sorrow etched lines deeper into her face.

“She’s gone. She won’t come back, I’ve made sure of it.”

I shuddered. “Mother, where is she?”

"At rest. She was so tired."

"Mother..."

Her eyes pleaded. "Natalie, you have to understand my position. Everything I've worked for. I tried so hard."

Staring at her, I backed away, out of the room. Mitchell followed, questions darkening his face, but I knew, I already knew.

We found Claire outside, sitting upright in a lounge chair, facing the sea. Mitchell checked her vital signs even though it was obvious she'd been dead for several hours.

"I'll make the call." Mitchell touched my arm, then turned

toward the car.

Wind rustled the hair on my sister's forehead. Her image blurred as tears filled my eyes. I wanted to touch her, to know for sure, but I couldn't contaminate the scene. Besides, I knew there would be nothing to read. A heart attack or maybe an aneurysm, the triggering agent already absorbed. Even if I was allowed to do a bone reading, it wouldn't make any difference. Inadmissible.

I didn't even flinch when the gunshot sounded from inside the house. Closing my eyes, I waited for the sirens. 🍁

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## ***Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection at the University of Alberta Library***

The University of Alberta Library is soliciting donations to its recently established Science Fiction Deposit Research Collection to create a still larger, publicly accessible, research collection of regional and national significance, similar to that of Toronto's Merril Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation and Fantasy.

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*He wanted to call out his ex's name...but he couldn't remember it.  
Humane therapy for an obsession, or mental cruelty?*

# Corrective Surgery

J.S. Lyster

I SAW HER ON CHURCHILL STREET, A MANE OF raven-hair hanging straight down her back. Achingly familiar. I looked up at the Royal Center building, my destination, and said aloud to myself, “The shrink can wait.” Then I followed her, keeping pace just meters behind. She wore a black skirt that stopped at her knees, a narrow skirt that slowed her down. My mouth hurt, lips pressed together to the point of welcome pain.

She didn’t see me. I kept pace with her, my hands in the pockets of my wine-colored ski jacket, my collar hitched up like Dracula’s cloak. She marched down the snow-littered sidewalk with a purposeful stride, and I knew in that moment that she was meeting someone along here, someone in one of the coffee shops along Churchill. I could see ahead of us the rectangular green-bordered sign of the Center Street Cafe. My hands became fists in my pockets.

My feet were cold; I’d opted for sneakers this morning, not my winter boots, since I was taking the underground most of the way here—Churchill Station was half a block away.

She hiked her enormous purse up higher onto her shoulder. I sucked a breath through my nose, smelled gasoline and perfume. I was in her vapor trail.

I wanted to call her name. But I couldn’t remember it.

She wasn’t going into the Center Street. But someone else stepped out just as she neared the door, and this woman walked towards me. She had a face that was narrow, and made of sharp corners rather than soft slopes. A shock of dark brown hair perched on the top of her head. My eyes flickered

from her to the other, and I realized I'd made a mistake. *She* didn't have long black hair. *She* was this one walking towards me, past me, glancing my way and flickering a detached smile at me. I turned and looked at the back of her head, then looked at the woman I had been following. *She* was one of them, she had to be. I looked back and forth, struggling to find a memory that fit either of them. One in a skirt and jacket and black hose; the other in a long mahogany coat, her hair shaved from the back of her neck where her collar met her skull.

That was her. I turned and started following.

In minutes I was outside my shrink's office building again. *She* passed a plump woman with a fake fur hat on her head. I gasped. Some essence of her leaped from the thin woman, and my attention shifted again.

I hunted my thoughts for her name. Maureen? No, that had been my mother's name. It was... Stephanie. That was it.

No; Stephanie was that girl I knew in high school, in my last year. I took her to my graduation and danced badly with her beneath the hard yellowish lights of R.H. Talbot High's gymnasium.

"Shit," I muttered. Her face was gone from my mind. No, not quite gone: changing. Constantly shifting. Her eyes were wide apart, separated by the bridge of her too-large nose. No, they were close, sharp and piercing above a sharp nose and angular face, eyes like amethysts—no, brown eyes as big as

quarters...

"Goddamn!" I said. A tall man walking past me glanced my way, shock drawing his mouth into a line.

I stopped and watched after the plump woman as she continued on down Churchill. A moment later she turned at the corner of Arthur Street, and was gone. I shut my eyes.

David would be waiting. I ground my teeth together and shoved my hands into my pockets. Then I strode up the marble steps and into the warmth of the building.

His receptionist showed me into his office.

"How are the wife and kids?" I said, almost sneering at him.

"They're fine. How have you been?" David Mitchelson was a tall skinny balding bastard wearing dress pants and a cream-colored sweater—trying to look professional and casual at the same time.

He motioned me to his burgundy couch. I dropped my ass into it. "Fucked," I said, by way of answering his question. "I'm totally fucked. I can't think." I pounded the side of my head with my right palm. "This thing is wrecking my brain."

"It doesn't cause damage," Mitchelson said calmly. "It simply randomizes your memories when you attempt to focus on your obsession."

"It's driving me crazy."

Mitchelson shook his head. "Jason, the loop doesn't change your memories, doesn't wipe them. We can't do that. All it does is disrupt your recall. You don't remember



her properly, so you add false details to your own memories. Over time you will no longer be able to fixate on your obsession." He smiled. "Like trying to remember a face in a dream.

My *obsession*. That's what he called my ex. Like she was some kind of drug. He didn't get it at all. We were going to get married. She was supposed to keep her promises.

"It isn't right," I murmured.

Mitchelson pursed his lips and leaned back in his easy chair. His "office" looked like a living room out of a movie: old-style leather couch, with ornate wooden armrests; a chair that matched the couch. There were bookcases all over the place, and he kept a coffee pot on a round wooden three-legged table next to the windows. He actually had *drapes* for his windows, not Venetian blinds like those in his outer office.

He had a couple of family photos on his bookcases. His wife was pretty. Envy stabbed at my belly.

"That may be true," he said. "And you can always change your mind about the surgery. You can choose jail."

"Great fucking choice."

"There's no call for language like that."

"Fuckin' A."

He smiled in forced sympathy. "What have you been doing with yourself lately?"

I made a crude motion with my fist. "Lots of this. And work. Bob looks at me like I crawled out of the sewers and into his lock-box." Bob owned the parking lot where I

worked. He hadn't been keen on having me work there when he learned I was up on charges, but he couldn't fire me on that account. I was careful to make sure the till tallied every day.

I'd lost my job at the Radio Shack at the Railway Square Mall after the cops took me in the first time. That hurt.

"This damn thing is driving me out of my head." My voice came out shrill and girlish. I ran my fingers along the line of bristles along the side of my head. They had shaved a track around my head above my ears. After three weeks the stitches were out and the hair was growing back.

"It will come out when you can show us you're able to manage your obsession," Mitchelson said.

I looked at him hopefully, and wrapped my coat around myself. I was sweating like a son-of-a-bitch, but I couldn't take the coat off. It was a shield between me and him. "What can I do to speed things along?"

"Just get on with your life. Put her behind you. What did you do today?"

"It's my day off, like usual." I shrugged. "I saw her again, on the street outside. What does the law say about *her* hassling *me*?"

Mitchelson straightened up. His mouth was a pencil line. "You know that Ms...your ex, I mean, hasn't been near you. She has no reason to be."

"Well, she was." Then I remembered how she'd changed, right in front of me, raven hair to brown

to...

"Shit," I breathed. "I screwed up, didn't I?"

Mitchelson watched me through narrowed eyes.

"All right," I said hastily. "I just thought I saw her. Big deal."

"Jason," the shrinker said, "you have to get out of this zone you're in. Find something to do with yourself when you start thinking about her. Get your focus off her."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I dropped my coat next to my door and grabbed a beer can from the fridge, then sat down in the living room and picked up the remote. Click click click, through the cable band.

The crap on my coffee table was piling up. I hadn't done anything with the papers they'd given me about the surgery; I still had the brochure—they actually put out a brochure advertising it, a three-fold, double-sided glossy. My tax dollars at work.

*The Cure*, the cover said. The picture showed a silhouette of a human head, outlined in black. And within it, the loop, just above the ears, a noose around the brain instead of the neck.

I looked like I had a punk-rock haircut, what with the shaven strip around my head. I could feel the loop beneath my skin in some places, like along my forehead just above my brow. They didn't have to crack my skull-bone to put it in, just opened the skin and laid it in the flesh.

Sometimes I thought about tak-

ing a knife to the side of my head, seeing if I could run a serrated blade through the skin, cut the wire, free my brain.

I looked at the mess on my coffee table. Then I laid my arm across the table and swept all the junk onto the carpet. I collected a Glad bag from the kitchen, and started filling it with the crap on the carpet. A bunch of old magazines, *Time* and *Road & Track*. The latest issue of *Discover* had an article about the loop in my head. I threw it into the bag also. Out went all the papers they'd given me after my court hearing. Screw it all.

I picked up a little red book from amid the papers. For a moment I didn't recognize it. My address book. I opened it and turned pages. Addresses and phone numbers: my brother out west; a couple of computer dealers, from when I was hunting for a new machine; my work numbers. I lifted the book and aimed it at the bag.

I opened it with my thumb as I readied to throw, and my eyes caught the page I held. A name: *Alison Bly*.

Recognition. I looked at the address below her name. 4378B Grafton Street. Newcastle. That was her. *She* lived up in the 'burb.

My heart wound up. Damn, damn, damn. I had her name again, the way it had been on the tip of my tongue for weeks, never quite coming to me.

*Don't think about it*, I said to myself. *Don't think about it or it'll go away.*

I felt like I had just woken up

when I reached the bus stop. There was a book in my hand. My thumb on the page. I looked down at it.

In big red letters somebody had written:

*Jason:*

*Trust me. The address above is HERS. Don't forget.*

*Signed, You.*

*Hers? I thought. Whose?*

Then I remembered. I looked at the numbers. Grafton Street. Was that where *she* lived now? My breathing raced.

I caught the number 101 to Newcastle, flashed my bus pass at the driver. He was a fat mustached guy with dark skin. "Uh, listen, I said. "I don't know Newcastle very well. Can you tell me when we reach Grafton Street?"

"Sure." His voice sounded like gravel pouring out of a dump-truck. I nodded thank you and sat down in one of the empty old-folks seats at the front.

The bus rattled north into Newcastle. I watched the traffic go by. My folks lived in Newcastle.

"Grafton Street," the driver said.

Mom and Dad lived on Robert Street. I sat looking at the back of the bus. Nobody was getting off. The other four people on the bus stared at me like I was dogshit.

"This is Grafton Street," the driver rumbled, and glared at me.

I looked down. My address book. An address: Grafton.

*Jason. Trust me. The address above is hers.*

"Shit," I muttered. Then, louder,

"Thanks." I heaved myself up and hurried off the bus.

I could feel the heavy rhythm of my heartbeat as I walked. My hand held the book by its bottom edge, a page folding over and creasing in my grip. I fell into a routine of glancing down at the page every few seconds, absorbing the message there and the address, keeping my memory on track.

Once (or twice, or maybe more) I turned up the wrong walkway and double-checked the address.

The building was a duplex, a house with a bottom floor (A) and a top (B). The siding was aluminum, and the balcony railing was wood painted brown. Snow had been shoveled off the sidewalk and onto the lawn.

The entrance walkway led to a door tucked between the side of the house and a hedge. I hitched up my collar and strode down the concrete slope. My thumb landed on the white tab of the doorbell button. My breath made a white haze before me. I had to look down at the address book again to remember why I was here.

Footsteps, the rapid-fire sound of feet descending a staircase. Then a click of the deadbolt going back. The door opened slightly.

"Jason? Dammit—!"

I saw a sliver of darkness and a pair of wide eyes. I slammed my shoulder against the door and it burst from her hands.

"You aren't supposed to be here," the woman said. Her eyes were big beneath her straight blonde hair. She stumbled back against the steps behind her. They

were covered in worn green carpet. She fell and caught herself with her left arm.

I knew her, but she didn't matter; she wasn't *her*.

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"Who?" She spoke in a voice I could barely hear.

I closed my eyes and sucked breath through my teeth. Struggled for a name. Stephanie? Gwen. No, Gwen was my sister. Yvette? No, she was...

"Her," I said. "You know who I mean. We were together for almost a year." A book was in my hand. I lifted it, saw a name. "Alison."

The blonde's eyes took in the address book. "Oh. Her."

"She's here, isn't she?"

The woman's mouth seemed to chew on something that tasted bad. "No, she's not." Her throat twitched. I felt like I was looking down on her from some great height, like she was a bug on the pavement.

"Where is she?" I put a rough timbre into my words.

"She moved," the blonde blurted out. "She moved away. I don't know where. France, maybe."

"Don't bullshit me; she's here." I stepped over her and bounded up the steps. The layout was what I remembered, though the furniture had changed—I'd taken mine with me. The couch was smaller than mine, and with a dark flower print. White bookcases, a small portable Sanyo stereo with detached speakers.

"You aren't supposed to be here," the blonde said. "There's a court order against you." Her jaw hardened. "Get out. Now."

"Can you get a message to her?"

She looked me up and down angrily. "What do you want to tell her?"

Suddenly I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. What words were there? During that period in my life—the one year we were together—I'd been whole, complete. I'd found that one who was meant for me. I could look at her and see kids and grandkids, all the pieces fitting together like a grand puzzle. And ever since we'd come apart, my life was out of my control.

The words came out exactly as I had thought them, stream-of-consciousness. I stood gasping, almost sobbing, salt water stinging my eyes.

The blonde shook her head. "There's no such thing as *the only one*. You watch too much television."

"We were meant for each other; don't you understand that?"

"She disagrees." The woman's mouth pinched. "You want a fairy tale, that's your problem. But phoning constantly all night, and yelling threats from the front lawn, those aren't exactly tried-and-true wooing techniques, especially after she says it's over. The balcony scene worked for Romeo—but Juliet wanted him. Now you can get out or I'll phone the police."

SHE CALLED THE COPS ANYWAY. They nailed me a block from the house, on my way back to the bus stop. One of them, a tubby guy in sunglasses, came up to me and asked me my name, and when I told him he said I was under arrest for violation of an order of the

court. His partner was bald and black. He opened the police car's rear door.

Tubby Cop put his big meaty hand on the top of my head when I bent down, and pushed me into the back.

They put me in a cell that stank to high heaven of cleaning products. An hour later, Dave Mitchelson and my lawyer, Mr. Garfield, arrived. Another cop—a lady this time, small and plump, with her dark hair tied in a bun behind her head—led me to a tiny room with gray walls that looked like they had been whitewashed in a previous epoch.

"Don't say anything," was the first thing Garfield told me. "Let me handle this."

I shut up. The cop told them how I had gone to visit my ex and how the cops were notified that I had "violated a court injunction forbidding the suspect from approaching within 200 meters of his former cohabitant or her domicile."

*She* was really gone. Some people say they knew when their mothers or wives or husbands died—they felt it like a thread tearing apart between them. I felt that too; a connection between us was broken.

Then I played back what the lady cop had said.

She was still talking. "This is grounds for having Mr. Parsons returned to minimum security." Her gaze fixed on Dave the shrink.

"I don't believe that would be wise," he said in his high-brow voice. "This treatment is experimental, but for the most part it

seems to be working."

"I think it's in my client's best interests," Garfield piped up, "to remain in the community. He is clearly no danger to society; nobody was threatened in this incident."

The cop's mouth formed a sneer. "Ms. Bly says Mr. Parsons practically kicked her door in."

"That's not what I found in your report. Ms. Bly stated—"

"Perry Mason," I said casually, "shut up for once."

Garfield stared at me. "Mr. Parsons—"

I held up my hand, snapping my fingers out in front of him. The lady cop opened her mouth to speak.

"My hack lawyer wasn't paying attention," I said. "You can't hold me, and even you can figure out why. The court order says I can't go near my ex or her house, right?" I grinned. "Well, it says nothing about Ms. Bly or whatever the hell that blonde's name is. I didn't see my ex, so how did I violate her dickhead court order? And her friend told me she doesn't even live there anymore, so how the hell was I anywhere near my ex's *doe-mi-cile*?"

The lady cop stared at me with a look that suggested she'd sat on a tack and didn't know how to get up gracefully.

David pursed his lips.

Garfield's gaze bounced around the room, me to Dave to the Ms. Sunshine and back.

The shrink was the first to talk. "I think we should finish this discussion without Mr. Parsons here."



"Hey, you can't put me back in a cell."

The cop got up and went to the door. The two constables who brought me in stood outside, and they made it clear that, yes, they *could* put me back in a box.

But ten minutes later I was out.

The lady cop did the talking. "We've decided that you're right. There isn't any point in holding you."

Dave and Garfield led me to the front desk and told me to sign for my coat and a little red book they'd found in my pocket. I picked up the book, wondering why the hell I'd brought it with me. I opened it and twigged that it was my address book. A couple of pages had been

torn out near the front. I didn't remember doing that; but lately I didn't remember a lot of things.

Dave gave me a lift back downtown, to my apartment building.

"You'll be all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure."

"Good," he smiled. "I'll see you next week." His car pulled away from the curb.

*She* was gone. I could feel it now. There was a hollow place in me.

But when I turned, I saw her half a block away. Short dark hair, her body clad in a thick blue parka, jeans, black boots. Casually walking away. I opened my mouth to yell, to call her back.

My tongue stalled. I couldn't remember her name. 🍁

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*Technology may change, but an age-old problem remains—  
What happens when an innocent man is convicted...  
and nobody cares?*

# Squat

Donna McMahon

Usually I'm proud of my job and I don't let any crap worry me. When I served with the Peacekeepers in Peru and Estonia, I saw a lot worse. But Friday morning as I watched the Special Duty guy, Kahlifa, set the magnetic brakes on the gurney and check the prisoner's restraints, I felt something inside me snap. I shoved my clammy hands roughly into my pockets and swallowed hard, telling myself it was just after-effects of all the meds during quarantine before I shipped up to orbit.

Kahlifa's gloved fingers searched the prisoner's thin brown wrist, looking for a good vein for the IV needle. Behind him a sweaty saline bag hung from the IV tree, transparent tubing snaking down from it. In a couple of minutes, Kahlifa would take hold of that tube and inject it with sodium pentathol, then with the lethal stuff.

I didn't want to watch until I had to, so I stared at the name tag on the prisoner's coveralls ("Pajit"), but my gaze strayed to his face. His eyes were open, giant drug-glazed pupils staring up. He looked about fourteen, I realized with sick shock. He blinked, and for a second I was back in the Bloor Street copshop watching Jimmy emerge shame-faced from the holding area into the brightly lit waiting room, blinking, trying to hold himself tall, too scared and ashamed to meet his father's eyes. My stomach churned.

"No!" I said suddenly.

Kahlifa turned to look at me, and for a second I thought his impenetrable Arab face might be showing surprise behind the surgical mask. That's another dicking regulation, by the way. There's nothing medical about

executions—I figure the masks are for us to hide behind. Like a death squad.

Kahlifa glanced at the prisoner, then nodded towards the door, but I didn't want a conference. I pulled off my mask and hurled it.

"I'm not witnessing this," I said through a tight throat. "Find somebody else."

I wanted to slam my way out, but the big air-seal doors on space stations don't slam. I punched the release lever and hauled at the door too hard, losing my balance and tripping over the sill. I'd only been back a few days after a year dirtside and I was still getting my low-gravity reflexes back.

Mad at myself and Kahlifa and everybody else, I started jogging anti-spinward along Corridor One, compensating automatically for the weird effects caused by one-quarter gee of inertial pull along the outer edge of the station. Running is easy once your eyes and inner ear get used to it—the real trick is stopping your mass with limited traction, especially on the anti-spinward or downhill slope. It's kind of like ice skating inside a big tire.

I fought back a sudden panicky sense of being trapped. It hits all of us sometimes when we start thinking there's nowhere to go. I couldn't face reporting back to my shift. I wasn't ready to sleep in my cube or eat in the mess, so that left the gym, where I could beat on something until I felt better.

And it didn't matter which way I went, I'd get there. Corridor One circles the outside of the whole wheel-shaped station, accessing

control rooms, tech junctions, crew quarters, and spoke access. Total monotony. The only way you can tell the doors apart is to read the signs. Except...

My head whipped around, I missed a step and plowed into a bulkhead with my shoulder, skidded to a stop, and then backtracked to the door of the Legal Office. Since my last shift, an ornate sign had been painted on it with fancy engraving script.

*B.J. Quinn, LL.D.*

*Please present your card to the Clerk of the Chambers for an appointment*

I studied it with awe and not just for its up-your-regs boldness. I always admire guys with talent—I'm just dead average at everything. Then an idea hit me and I pressed the buzzer.

"Not in!" boomed a voice, distantly audible even through the thick door.

"It's Olmstead," I shouted.

"Here on business?"

"Nope," I lied.

"Oh. Very well. Enter."

I punched the release and the door swung slowly open, revealing a large man sandwiched behind a small plastic desk littered with clipboards and datadisks. Plastic, by the way, is a vegetable-based gloop that's extruded into molds and hardens instantly in a vacuum. It looks like old chewing gum under fluorescent lights and it feels like slimy marble. Ben hadn't changed much since I'd last seen him. Maybe a little less hair up top, a little more gray in his non-regula-

tion beard, and a few extra pounds on his paunch. He's way over the weight limit for station personnel, but the consortium has a hard time finding qualified lawyers who'll spend a year on a prison space station. Ben gets away with a lot.

He reached over and offered his hand without standing up.

"Commiserations, old man. I see we have our Canadian back on the Mount."

It was always strange to hear that deep, polished English voice coming out of a slob. I shook Ben's hand and made myself grin. "I see they're still scraping the bottom of the legal barrel."

"The legal bottle, don't you mean?" He gestured with his coffee mug. "Care for a dram?"

I shook my head and grabbed the visitor's chair. Most guys put up landscapes on the walls to make the rooms seem bigger, but Ben has flimsies of floor-to-ceiling bookcases packed with old books. I could almost smell the dust. And Ben's chairs had been detached from their floor bolts, rigged to tilt backwards, and upholstered with vandalized bedding. All against regs, of course. I sat back and raised my feet onto his desk with a satisfying thump. What we all wouldn't give to do this in the main control room...

"I trust you won't mind if I top mine up," said Ben, reaching into his desk drawer. Booze is against regs, too, but we make "Mountain 'shine" and Ben's into it all the time. That's probably why he's here instead of in some high-priced firm planetside.

"Playing hooky?"

"Pulled witness duty."

"Ah. Pajit." Ben dropped the jovial act and looked at me sympathetically. "Sure about that dram?"

"Maybe later. Look, what the hell's that kid doing here? He looks about fourteen."

"I don't send them up here," observed Ben coolly, and I realized that my voice had come out too harsh. Like I was blaming him.

I tried to unclench my hands and relax.

"Sorry, Ben—I'm carrying some voltage."

He shrugged and stared down into his 'shine.

"I doubt there'd be many criminal lawyers if we had to witness the consequences of our actions," he said with sudden bitterness, and I realized suddenly that he was quite drunk.

"Yeah, well, I refused."

He frowned up at me for a second, then I saw understanding dawn. His eyebrows rose.

"I could have sworn I heard you say 'refused.'"

"Yeah," I said defensively, trying not to feel like an idiot. This was going to buy me trouble I didn't even want to think about yet. "It wasn't right!"

"Right?" What a quaintly Kantian notion to issue forth from a cog in the great wheel of incarceration."

I don't always understand Ben, but I know when I'm being sneered at, and it must have showed on my face. Ben waved a conciliatory hand at me.

"Sorry, Mike. So I assume you're here to ask me about Pajit."

I nodded. Ben sighed and reached for his antique keyboard. Yeah, keyboard. Montgolfier Station was knocked together a decade ago from old industrial overstock and army surplus—cheap antiques. I try not to think about it too much.

Ben's eyes flicked to the ancient tube monitor that takes up half his desk, but I didn't think he really needed to look at the records. He just does it for show.

"Manuel Pajit. Wharf rat from Bangkok. He's a squat, of course, but independent cargo carriers hire a lot of illegals. Pajit was arrested in Hong Kong for the rape and murder of two boys in different ports. Young cretin claimed to be eighteen, but I very much doubt it. He was tried in adult court and convicted in short order since he couldn't afford a live lawyer. He received a twenty-five-year sentence."

"So what's he doing here?" I interrupted. Most of our inmates are politicals—terrorists, counter-intelligence, ex-government and corporate execs mainly, shipped up for low-gravity manufacturing work. Governments pay to get rid of them and the consortium gets free labor. I hear there's dirtside lawyers working on appeals and more appeals but nobody's left here yet. Alive, that is.

"Patience, Mike, I'm giving you background. Most nations extradite foreign criminals if they can, but Pajit is a third-generation refugee—no citizenship—so China was stuck with him. Then a last-minute slot opened up in their Montgolfier quota and some bright bureaucrat

in Beijing had the idea of transferring him here. He was sent up five months ago."

He paused for a long swig from his mug.

"Meanwhile, relatives of the victims appealed Pajit's sentence in Chinese court, demanding the death penalty. They won, but then had to apply to International Court, which presides over Montgolfier Station. International Court reluctantly agreed, mostly I think because they didn't want the expense of contesting the case. Hence, our execution order.

"Now, this is where our case becomes interesting." Ben's voice took on dramatic relish. "Police in Panama became interested in one of Pajit's erstwhile crewmates. Earlier this month, they hauled him in and thanks to their gentle persuasions, he confessed to several murders, including those that Pajit was convicted of."

"Hold, it," I said, startled. "Are you telling me that Pajit's innocent?"

"It would certainly appear so."

For a second I just stared at him.

"But we nearly killed him!"

Ben gave a genial shrug.

"It's a question of process, Mike. An execution order has gone through. To cancel it, a stay must be filed via Panama, China and International Court. Pajit, of course, has no country to initiate legal action on his behalf. Which leaves it in the hands of your local spinning charity barrister. I'm putting together the formware for a stay and full pardon, but the backlog of International cases is immense, even for



items classified as urgent.”

“That’s insane! Surely you can do something—pull strings!”

“I think you’d be more comfortable sitting, old man,” said Ben quietly, and I realized that I was standing up with both fists clenched. I controlled myself with effort and sat.

Ben leaned forward, put his elbows on the desk and steepled his fingers.

“I appreciate your indignation, but let us for a moment discuss reality. I’m the sole official legal counsel for over two hundred prisoners whose jurisdictional and legal status on this geosynchronous gulag is so complicated that nobody, including me, understands it. It takes me days just to wade through the Byzantine mess of international records. Furthermore, I have no ‘pull.’ I and my antique amanuensis are at the very nadir of the legal food chain. With enormous effort, I might get a pardon through quickly, but not quickly enough.”

He paused, then added caustically, “And, between you and me, why should I?”

“Because he’s not guilty!” I snapped, furious at his indifference.

Ben shrugged.

“A lethal injection is more merciful than life as a squat, or a sentence of involuntary buggery up here, for that matter.”

“So we should *kill* him?” My hands clenched the padded chair as I fought for words. “Look, I know the law doesn’t care what’s right or wrong, just what’s legal. I’ve seen how it works, Ben. All those people didn’t die in Peru because soldiers

and officials were evil. People just followed goddamned regs and then let evil happen while we all sat on our goddamned hands!”

I had to stop because I realized that I was close to breaking down. I’ve been doing that lately. Remembering too much about Peru, I guess. Ben was giving me a strange look so I tried to pull myself together.

“You can’t fix the world, Mike.”

“I’m not trying to. I can’t even do the right thing half the time. But I can stop from doing wrong things when I know they’re wrong.”

Ben opened his desk drawer again, then said acidly: “I quit trying a long time ago, old man. I’m just one of the evil minions of the law, and a contributor to countless horrors.”

There was a brittle silence between us as he poured from the flask with the studied carefulness of someone who’s very drunk. I sat there fighting for calm. I’d never intended to get so upset about Pajit, but when I thought back on him lying on that gurney I knew I couldn’t let it go. I took a deep breath and tried to speak levelly.

“Look, you said you needed time. How much?”

Ben sighed and tugged at his beard. “A week. Two would be better.”

“If I buy you that time, will you do it?”

“You won’t get the time, Mike.”

“Look, Kahlifa’s the only guy on this shift who’s rated to do executions, and UN regs say he has to have a witness. I know him; he’ll follow regs.”

"True, but there are plenty of men on this station who want to earn a witnessing bonus."

"That's my problem. Will you do it?"

"Damnation!" he growled, but I heard a trace of amusement in his voice and I knew I had him. I leaned forward.

"Just say yes, Ben."

He sighed heavily.

"Heaven defend me from idealists and Canadians."

"Thanks."

I CHECKED THE TIME AFTER I LEFT Ben's office. Five twenty. "D" watch ended at oh six hundred and my boss came on duty at "A" watch. He'd want to chew me out, so why wait for an invitation? Besides, I needed to talk to him.

When Geir Eldjarnsson walked in carrying his breakfast tray, I had my butt planted in the regulation uncomfortable plastic visitor's chair in the office. During C/D watch, I sit in the uncomfortable boss' chair behind the desk since I'm C/D watch supervisor. During A/B, that chair is Geir's because he's the station commander. I just hoped I'd be sitting back there at eighteen hundred hours. The consortium doesn't like people who accept an assignment and then cop out.

Compared to Ben's office, ours is spartan. The only personal touch is the family pictures. On the spinspace bulkhead I'd posted flimsies of Jimmy, my mom, and my wife Ash, who died in the '28 pandemic. The other wall is for Geir's wife and kids in Reykjavik. Geir ignored me and

dumped several pats of butter into a steaming bowl of oatmeal, then sprinkled it with salt and pepper, and started opening shrinkpacks of syrup. I stared. I'd forgotten about his breakfasts. He caught my look.

"So what's it to you, Olmstead? I suppose you still eat fried pig slices?"

"Uh...yeah."

He snapped back the ZG lid on his cup and took a swig of coffee. I expected him to start giving me hell, but he surprised me.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Something's been burning you ever since you came up. How's Jimmy?"

"Fine."

"Uh huh."

He ate in silence while I sat. I knew this tactic. He'd wait me out until I told him something. Well, Geir had kids, too. I shifted awkwardly.

"Last month I got one of those four a.m. calls—the kind other parents get. 'Come down and post bail.' I thought Jimmy was sleeping at a friend's place for the weekend. Stupid, eh? Turns out they were out riding the T-line for drips, trips and break-ins. He promised it wouldn't happen again, but hell, he's fifteen and I'm gone for another year..."

I risked looking over. Geir's face was somber.

"Sorry to hear that, Mike. I worry about mine when I'm up here, too."

"Yeah."

Geir studied me with shrewd blue eyes. He has white-blond hair and an angelic face that makes him look much younger than forty, but

he's no fool and he's tough. He was an officer in the Peacekeepers for fourteen years.

"The med staff recommended you for another six months downtime. What the hell are you doing back?"

"Shit! I thought medical files were confidential!"

"Read your contract."

I hunched my shoulders uncomfortably.

"Med leave is half pay. Can't afford it."

"Maybe you can't afford not to."

I didn't answer. Geir sighed.

"Look, Mike, after I demobbed I got a real case of the PTs. I was smooth all those years under fire, but back home I started getting nightmares, flashbacks—everything. Scared hell out of my family. I ended up bunking in the Post Trauma ward for five months."

"I didn't know," I said, startled. Geir always seemed so much in control.

"I'm just saying maybe you should try it."

"I'll be okay," I told him, stubbornly. "Anyway, I'm talking to somebody. Twice a week. I'm fine."

"I hope so. I can't afford a case of PTs up here, Mike, especially a watch boss. I'm telling you straight that if you give me headaches, I'll replace you in mid-shift and you'll have to eat the performance fines."

"I'm okay," I repeated, trying to sound convincing. I leaned back in the chair, wishing it tilted like Ben's. Geir pushed aside his tray.

"So you just walked out on witness duty."

"Look, I don't have a problem

killing most of the viral shits we got up here. But Pajit is different."

Geir made a sour face.

"Different, yeah, he's a god-damned nightmare and I'll be glad to get rid of him. He's useless up here. No skills. And too young. Every horny con has been shagging him. We've had to put him in solitary twice to heal up."

"Ben says it's a false conviction."

"I heard."

"So what're you doing about it?"

Geir glared at me.

"I protested when he was sent up and I protested the execution order. HQ took it 'under advisement.' So I tried climbing rank and I was told flat to shut up. That's all I can do."

"You could refuse."

"On what grounds?"

"I don't know! Something!"

"Uh huh." He drummed on his coffee mug. "We're not breaking UN rules and there's no risk to the safety of station personnel, so that's it. And you know it. So you're asking me to put my ass on the line, aren't you?"

I nodded, uncomfortably aware of Geir's daughters smiling down from the wall. Things are even tougher in Europe these days than Canada, especially for vets. Hell, every guy up here was desperate to keep his job. Geir seemed to read my mind.

"And do I tell the crew to disobey too, maybe get fired?"

"But damn it, Ben says it's just a matter of time until the pardon comes through!"

"I sat on the order for two goddamned weeks but HQ says I face discipline if I delay any

longer."

"But what happens when the pardon comes in and he's already dead!"

"Not much. He's just a squat, and anyway those 'crats downstairs pass the buck at escape velocity." Geir's voice was bitter. "They'll all be genuinely sorry for the fuck up but it really wasn't their job and they couldn't do anything about it."

"Geir, that's just what *you're* saying."

Geir's face went rigid, and he glared at me. When he spoke, his voice was tight with fury.

"I'm not going to be your god-damned martyr, Olmstead! If you're so big on morals you can wave your own balls in the wind."

I crossed my arms, face burning, and looked away for a few seconds while I calmed down.

"Look, I'm sorry," I managed finally. "It's just..."

But I couldn't find any words. What the hell was my problem anyway? I heard a squeal of plastic as Geir leaned back in his chair, locking his hands behind his head. There was a long silence.

"How many of the guys are talking like this, Mike?" he asked at last.

"Lots," I lied. "They feel the same."

Geir sighed.

"Look, I don't want to see the kid dead either. But I'm not going to take a dry dive. They'll bust you and me and everyone else down the line until one guy says yes."

I thought it over.

"What if I get unanimous support?"

"A job action? Shit!" Geir

groaned. "I don't want to think about it. Anyway, you'd never pull it off. You'd need *everybody*, including Kahlifa."

"I can do that," I said, faking confidence I didn't feel. I rose and headed for the door. Geir's voice came from behind me.

"Pajit's re-scheduled for oh six hundred tomorrow. You've got until then."

I HATE PITCHING. I GOT A JOB AS A salesman once, and didn't last three weeks. But I couldn't see any choice. So I started with the guys who'd just come off D shift and were eating in the mess.

They surprised me. At first they didn't say much, but when I explained what Ben said about Pajit being innocent, they all began talking about the asshole 'crats downstairs and how we'd be the ones to catch the blame for the kid's death, not them. After a bit they even got enthusiastic. Face it, there's not much to do up here. This could be the biggest event since the '31 riot. I caught some other guys on coffee break and then, at twelve hundred hours, the watch changeover. By twelve-thirty I figured I could count on seventeen out of twenty crew, and two would cave in with enough pressure. I'd provide the pressure if I had to.

That left Kahlifa, our "Special Duty" guy. Executioners get a bonus, but the consortium still has trouble finding volunteers. For one thing, everybody tends to avoid the Special Duty guy—he's kind of a social leper. But I couldn't put off talking to Kahlifa any longer, so I

went to his bunk and buzzed.

I don't know what I was expecting, but what I found wasn't it. Kahlifa sat cross-legged on his bed wearing an embroidered Moroccan cap and a bright blue caftan, playing chess against the computer. He'd used part of his precious five-kilo baggage allowance to bring up a colorful striped floor mat and one of those little stools with a Koran on it. One wall was covered with family pictures. I pulled down the drop seat and squeezed my knees into the space between the seat and the bed. Before I could say anything he pulled out a thermal flask of coffee, so I had to sit there and drink with him and try to make small talk. Not easy. There's no weather on the Mount and I'm sick of jokes about Toronto's.

I'd used my supervisor clearance to peek at his file and found to my surprise that Kahlifa was only thirty-seven—five years younger than me. It was his craggy brown weather-seamed face that made him look like he'd spent decades trekking through the desert. And maybe he had. He'd served three hitches in the Moroccan army and one in the Peacekeepers.

Finally I figured I could get down to it, so I gave him my pitch and then waited a long uncomfortable minute, fighting back a sinking sense of futility. I couldn't read any expression in his dark eyes, and my words sounded awkward and unconvincing, even to me.

"This is very interesting, Mr. Olmstead, but I do not think you will succeed," he said finally in his formal, heavily accented English.

"With your support I can. I need everyone on the station."

"To the contrary," he pointed out. "You do not need me. I cannot carry out an execution without a legal witness."

"We all have to stand together," I said desperately, aware that we treated Kahlifa like an outcast. He didn't owe us anything. "Look," I tried, "This is an injustice. Surely you don't want to see an innocent man die."

He shrugged.

"*Inshallah*. God is just. If He wills, the boy will not die."

"So it's not our problem?" I glared at him with open fury, but he just shrugged again.

"I'm sure the consortium appreciates your loyalty," I told him bitterly, and started to get up.

"Mr. Olmstead, have you talked to Pajit?"

I stopped, suddenly speechless. Hell, I hadn't even thought about it. And right now that kid was waiting to face his second execution. Shit.

"I will," I managed finally. I tried to think of something more to say but couldn't.

Kahlifa had turned his attention back to the chess game, and he added in a mild, almost absent tone:

"I wonder, who are you doing this for? A boy you do not know? Or yourself?"

I felt a sudden violent urge to hit him, and just barely held my self control.

"I'm not the one who's going to die!" I snapped, and strode out into the corridor, where I stood leaning against the bulkhead, shaking.



Jesus, I'd fucked that up. I'd said all the wrong things and then nearly assaulted another crew member. If I had, Geir would ship me down on the next shuttle.

And maybe he should, maybe I was cracking up. I'd seen guys come apart in the station before. Despite all the screenings, there's always a few who can't take it. But this was my fifth tour. I should be fine. I just needed more sleep. Adjusting to the station always takes a week or two. Then I'd be *okay*.

I took lots of long deep breaths, then straightened up and headed for Solitary on Level 2, my stomach churning queasily with guilt. Kah-lifa had been right, damn him. I had to talk to the kid.

At close range, Pajit was a skinny mongrel, all eyes and elbows and sullen scowl, his brown face dominated by a bony nose and stained, crooked teeth. Scars and bruises underlay the dark stubble on his scalp. He huddled defensively on the bunk as I swung the door open. He hadn't been sleeping. He looked up at me like a trapped animal as I halted with my arms crossed, wishing there was a seat.

I knew his English wasn't good, so I kept it simple, explaining that we hoped to delay the execution until his pardon went through. He just glowered down at his hands.

"You understand?" I tried.

"Si."

"We're trying to keep you alive. Not killed," I said.

No response.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"*Nyet.*"

"Well, it would mean something to me."

That got to him—I saw a flash of anger and he looked up.

"*You* be leaving this shithole. I be fucked in the ass."

"If you're pardoned, you leave," I said even as the sinking realization dawned that I hadn't thought this through.

"No squat don't leave."

He had a point. Montgolfier is a profit operation and shuttle payloads cost. I couldn't see anybody footing the bill for a squat, pardon or no pardon. I stood there speechless, feeling like the world's biggest asshole. I hadn't even thought about what would happen to the kid if he lived.

That's when I noticed that his fingernails were bitten back to the quick. I looked higher and saw him chewing his lip, looking just like Jimmy does when he's trying not to cry. Abruptly I thought: this boy is somebody's son.

"We'll find a way to get you down."

"Bullshit!" His voice cracked.

I leaned forward to pat his shoulder and he flinched violently. Wrong move. I backed off, straightened, and put on my best Sergeant's voice.

"*Listen up, mister!*"

Pajit was startled into glancing at me, mouth slightly agape.

"*I'm giving you orders, and you're going to follow them! You have three orders.*"

I rapped one finger across my palm.

"*One.* You'll need a job. Decide what kind of job you want and what

you need to get it." Pajit had pulled his mouth shut, but he seemed stunned. I don't imagine he'd had any experience with career counseling military style. I rapped two fingers on my palm.

"Two. You need education. School. Reading and writing. There are lessons on the net. I'll pay for the net time."

That, at least, I knew I could do.

"Three. Exercise." I mimed weight-lifting. "Up here you lose your muscles fast. You have to exercise. Now, you got that?"

He blinked.

"Understand?" I bellowed.

"Yeah."

"Okay," I said. "Get to work."

I kept up that false air of authority all the way back to my cabin, then I sat down on the bunk and put my head in my hands. I felt sick. What in the hell had I just promised? I had no reason to believe that I could arrange any of it. Me and my goddamned mouth. Geir was going to erupt.

He did.

"You said *what*?" His pixelated image stared incredulously from my screen. "That's bullshit! There isn't a country in the world that accepts squats. He isn't even qualified for a UN refugee camp."

"Maybe someone could sponsor him as an immigrant," I suggested weakly.

"For Christsakes, take on some gees, Mike! Look, the kid will find a nice big boyfriend and he'll be okay. But you—you're way out of line. What in the hell was going through your head?"

I was out of smart answers. I

hunched forward and ran my hand miserably across my stubbly station cut. Finally I shrugged.

"I think I fucked up."

Geir glared at me some more from the screen.

"Well, you damn well better fix it, Olmstead. You tell the kid you were wrong, and you do it now. He deserves that."

The screen blanked. I was turning away when it flashed on again.

"And you've got twenty-four hours to call and book a psych appointment or I'm flagging you for a medical review. Don't make me do it!"

The screen blanked again and stayed dark, and I stared at it, feeling wretched and furious. When I thought about facing Pajit again, I wanted to puke. It would be like kicking one of those mangy little street dogs in Lima. Funny, I'd learned to shoot at armed children, but I never could get myself to shoot those dogs.

Well, I couldn't do it now. Not yet.

I stripped off, palmed the light panel, and pulled the sheet over me, but my mind raced in loops, trying to think of some way to get Pajit off the station. Then the flashbacks from Peru started, and when I shoved those down I found myself remembering the look I'd seen on Jimmy's face when he came home and found his dad in bed crying at four in the afternoon. I finally dozed off for a few minutes and woke up tangled, sweaty and gasping, with the walls closing in around me. The techs tell us that the air circulation on the Mount is fine, but

most of us get the phobes anyway, and a few even jam doors open while they sleep. Suffocation is one of our two constant nightmares—the other is explosive decompression.

I hit the lights and sat up. I needed a drink.

Luckily Ben was still awake and he invited me to his cabin. When I got there, I peered around curiously. His walls were postered with paintings and sculptures; famous ones probably. Clothes were tossed on the floor and the unmade bed. Ben still wore his standard issue jumpsuit, very rumpled and stretched tight across the stomach. He didn't seem any more drunk than earlier, but it was always hard to tell.

"About that drink..." I said.

He pulled open a drawer under his bunk and took out a plastic flask. I opened it and sniffed. It smelled like schnapps and industrial waste. I took a large burning swallow and passed it back. Ben lifted the flask ceremoniously.

"To the real Scottish mothers' milk, nectar of the gods, and may we taste it again soon," he intoned, then drank.

I sank into the drop seat, eyes watering, trying to suppress a cough but savoring the wonderful glow in my stomach that I'd pay like hell for in a few hours. I didn't care. I drank some more.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Pajit."

"Ah. Your campaign not going well?"

"If he doesn't get death, he gets a lifetime in orbit for something he

never did."

"I take it you didn't consider that?"

I shook my head, feeling stupid.

"And Geir..."

"Not his problem." It came out more savagely than I had intended and I felt ashamed. I would have done the same in Geir's shoes. I asked: "You know anything about immigration?"

Ben leaned back against the wall, and raised an eyebrow.

"Not a great deal, old man, but enough to tell you that his only hope would be a sponsorship and that is, to understate the case, unlikely. I don't know about Canada, but E.U. sponsors have to guarantee financial support for ten years, and they're liable for fines and legal penalties if he gets in any trouble. And the process, even by legal standards, is complicated, expensive, and time consuming. I can't imagine that anyone would go through it, never mind for a squat they'd never met."

I clenched the flask and winced, but forced the words out anyway.

"What if I did it? Could you help me?"

Ben stared at me.

"I do believe you've had too much, Mike. Or maybe not enough."

I glared back at him. "What the hell else am I supposed to do, Ben? I started this whole damned thing and by God I have to finish it."

"Mike, do you know exactly what sort of expense I'm talking about here?"

I shook my head miserably, and got a slight dizzy sensation from the

Coriolis force. The alcohol on an empty stomach was hitting me hard. Then Ben gave me a cost estimate and I got really dizzy.

"Do you have that much?"

"Hell, no," I said, fighting down panic. "But I can find it. I've been broke before." But not at my age, with a mother and son to support. And I couldn't expect them to understand, especially Jimmy. I drained the flask.

"The formware sometimes takes years."

"Years?"

"'Fraid so." Ben studied me for a little while, then said quietly:

"Drop it, Mike."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Look, consider this. For the first time in Pajit's life he's got enough food, clothes, meds and even net access. He won't get maimed in a cargo carrier or pick up any of the nasty viruses running through the squats. Ironical, isn't it? We bring the masterminds of human atrocity to our hotel, while their victims die in the dirt."

I didn't bother answering. I'd heard it before.

"So why are you doing this, Mike? Surely you Canucks aren't really that nice?"

It must have been the booze that made me try to answer.

"Ben, it's... You don't have any kids, do you?"

"I have two."

"Yeah?" I was startled. He had no pics of family—never mentioned any. "Then maybe you know about how kids...well, change you."

"I doubt it," he said icily. "As my ex-wife would be happy to inform

you, I am a callous son of a bitch, a vicious bastard, and a miserable failure. I like to think it gives me something in common with my clients."

The tone of Ben's voice chilled me. Under his contrived good humor was an edge of anger so intense that I found myself leaning away from him.

"You're a good lawyer," I said awkwardly.

He snorted.

"I'll let you in on a secret, Mike. I'm not that good. And I don't actually care about these pathetic sods."

He must have seen something in my face and realized that he'd gone too far. Abruptly he changed the subject.

"Look, I'll give you the name of a good immigration lawyer, but for what it's worth, I think it's lunacy. Leave the poor bastard alone."

I think it was his mocking tone that sparked my temper. I stood abruptly, spitting words at him.

"You know what I hate, Ben—it's the way you sit around and play the Great Cynic. Nothing's worth trying, nothing's worth doing, nothing will work. And you snipe at anybody who tries. You and your fucking sophistication, and your cynical horseshit!"

I threw the flask against the wall. It bounced and rebounded, narrowly missing me. I saw Ben flinch, but his face had gone quite blank.

"Well, I'm going to go out and do something stupid, and when I fail you can sit there all smug, laughing because you were right. But at least I'll be able to look myself in the

mirror. I'll be someone my kid can be proud of. And you'll still be drunk and miserable and alone."

AT EIGHTEEN HUNDRED HOURS I staggered on duty with a crashing hangover. I took a spell at the monitors—a real snore job where we watch a bank of flatscreens scanning randomly through all the prison levels of the station, trying to catch something that computer surveillance would miss—but I couldn't concentrate at all. I tried drinking coffee, then had to run out and puke it up.

When I got back, Themba came to talk to me. He's southern African, very black, with an infectious white-toothed grin. But he wasn't smiling this time.

"Mike, you sick?"

"Went drinking with Ben. Guess I'm out of practice."

"Ah." There was relief in Themba's eyes. That was a better reason for my shakes than the one he'd been thinking of. His habitual grin reappeared. "I think maybe you go back to bed, get up later. We cover for you, no sweat."

It was a good offer, but I fought down a burning flash of humiliation. I'd never sicked out on my watch before. I couldn't trust my voice, so I nodded, then got up and left, not looking at the others, but feeling their eyes on my back.

On the way to my quarters I passed Sickbay, and on a sudden impulse I went in. The gurney stood in the middle of the room, sheets folded neatly on top, with the IV tree beside it. It looked completely benign, except for the

restraints bolted to the metal frame of the gurney. I found myself staring at them. Thinking about that kid's skinny wrists.

But I had a son already and responsibilities. If I lost my job, his future might go with it. I owed Jimmy. And I owed him to be a good father, to do the right thing. I looked at my hands. I couldn't hold them steady.

I turned around and went to the mess. Geir was there eating dinner. I asked him to meet me in the office, then I waited until the door closed behind us.

"Book me down," I said.

He looked at me a long time. Angry. Disappointed.

"You sure?"

"Like you said, you can't afford the PTs. Station's short enough on crew already."

There was a long pause, then he cleared his throat.

"Okay. Next shuttle is at oh five twenty. I'll check the payload and see if I can get you on. No baggage, though."

"Right," I said. I swallowed. "Uh, look, just as a favor, don't let on that I'm shipping out, okay? I'd like the guys to find out after I'm gone."

He nodded shortly.

"I'll do what I can."

Back in my quarters I fought down waves of nausea and then panic. I wanted to call Geir back, tell him to cancel the shuttle, I'd stay. Hell, Toronto was full of guys like me sleeping twelve-to-a-room in welfare shelters. But I'd committed myself now. I had to see it through.

There was no point trying to



sleep, so I plugged into entertainment vids. I don't remember any of them. I thought about calling home, but calls were expensive and they wouldn't change anything. I'd face my family later.

Just before oh four hundred, I went down to the mess and caught Themba on his break. He was alone like I'd hoped for—usually he took his break with me. I told him I was feeling better and I'd help him load the shuttle. He looked so pleased and relieved that I felt like an utter shit as I fetched a coffee for him and carefully slipped a knock-out into it.

I wasn't sure what would happen, but we just talked for a bit, then he got a strange look on his face, lay his head down on the table and started snoring. I jumped up and checked the corridor, then grabbed Themba under his shoulders and dragged his slumped body, grateful for the slight advantage of low grav. It couldn't have taken more than fifteen or twenty seconds to haul him to the nearest empty cube, but it seemed longer, especially the last part where his heels caught on the lip of the pressure door. I finished by taking his dog tags.

My next stop was the deserted backup command center, where I plugged my dogtags into the command panel and logged on with my passcode. New guys often expect retinal scans or voice recognition, but our antiques work okay. My palms were sweaty and my stomach knotted with tension. Everything I'd planned would be impossible if Geir had already canceled my supervisor passcode.

The panel chimed and I caught

my breath with relief. I entered a series of special overrides. They'd be automatically canceled at the start of the next watch, but my plan shouldn't take that long.

Next I let myself into the security sector on Level Two using Themba's dogtags. Pajit was awake in the solitary cell, watching the plexiglass-armored screen on the wall. English lessons. Somehow I felt immensely relieved. Maybe there was hope for him. When I ordered him into wrist restraints he looked frightened, though he tried to hide it behind a scowl. Fortunately he didn't ask questions. I didn't have time to explain.

My overrides worked. Pajit's implant alarm failed to go off when we left Solitary. But that was the last thing that went according to plan.

The crew locker room should have been empty, but when I walked in herding Pajit in front of me there was somebody standing with his back turned. I froze, swearing silently to myself. I didn't have a "Plan B." Before I could back up, he turned around. It was Kahlifa.

He frowned at Pajit and then me, and I heard my heart pounding in my ears.

"This is a secure area."

"I'm taking him to the shuttle bay," I said gruffly, trying to keep my face blank. "His pardon came through. He's going back."

It was a stupid lie but the only one I could think of. I marched Pajit towards my locker and pulled it open, hoping desperately Kahlifa would leave. I pulled out my environment suit and turned to see him standing with crossed arms,

watching.

For a second I considered trying to jump Kahlifa, but he was ready and I wasn't sure I could take him, anyway. So I gambled.

"Don't just stand there! Help me suit him up."

To my complete surprise, Kahlifa grinned. It made him look entirely different—younger. He walked over and grabbed my suit, nodding at Pajit's wrist restraints. "Take those off."

I pulled my mouth shut and unlocked them, astounded but grateful for the help. I needed it. The suit was far too large for Pajit and he was clumsy with inexperience. We struggled to get him into it, then I grabbed Themba's suit out of his locker. It was loose in the shoulders and tight in the feet, but otherwise not too bad a fit. I could have saved more time by skipping the safety check, but the habit's too ingrained. I ran through it, then slipped off the helmet and left it hanging down my back. Kahlifa had done Pajit's check and was waiting for me, holding the kid's arm. I couldn't resist.

"So what happened to *'Inshalah'?*" I asked.

Kahlifa shrugged.

"Who am I to say that you are not the hand of Allah?"

I was still trying to get my head around that one as I herded Pajit to the elevator and punched through the security procedure for the trip up-spoke to the station's hub. I told Pajit not to say or do anything, then I turned off his mike and secured his helmet. With reflected lights it was hard to see his face, and there was no mistaking the big orange

"OLMSTEAD" stamped on the suit. Still, he wasn't much of an imposter. As we rose up-spoke, with the weird sensation of sliding into the spinward elevator wall and lifting off the floor, the suit stretched up on the kid until he could barely peer over the bottom edge of the face plate. Well, there was nothing I could do about it.

The thump of the elevator doors echoed loudly against bare metal walls, girders, and pipes in the cargo bay. I had Pajit grab my shoulder and went hand-over-hand along a zero-gee guide cable to a dim corner behind some cargo nets where I anchored him next to a sign reading "Mass Matters! WATCH YOUR FINGERS!" He looked nauseous. I hoped he wasn't going to puke in my suit and then kicked myself. If this worked, I wouldn't see that suit again.

I logged into the manifest for loading instructions. It's usually a two-man job, so it was a good thing the load had been trimmed, and even better that the shuttle was running five minutes late. I was just barely ready when the first klaxon went off at our antique hatch—a relic from the years before standardized docking equipment. I closed my helmet, as per regs, and then went through the docking check-list while trying not to look back towards the elevator doors. Surely somebody was onto me by now.

But no alarms went off. I finished the final pressure checks and the hatch swung wide with a slight hiss. All lights green. I flipped up my helmet and attempted not to look appalled as it occurred to me that I

might know one of the pilots. What if they recognized me? Hell, what if *anybody* noticed I was wearing a suit labeled "MBUNDU"?

When the co-pilot floated out I thanked the gods that at least I'd never seen her before. She wrinkled her nose at the station air, which smells exactly like two hundred guys have been living in it for ten years. She scowled.

"What's with this unscheduled crew transfer?" she demanded.

"He's got the phobes."

"Then they shouldn't have sent him up!"

I shrugged and my shoulders clunked around in Themba's suit. The pilot looked around.

"Well, where the hell is he?"

"I'll get him. He's tranked to the eyeballs."

When I reached Pajit, I caught a glimpse of his frightened face so I mimed at him to close his eyes, pretend to be asleep. Then I launched him gently at the ZG scale. A laser flashed just before he hit the pad, then the read-out showed velocity/impact results. Pajit, suit and all, massed less than sixty kilos. I felt a rush of apprehension. He was much too small for a crewman.

The pilot turned from the scale and looked piercingly at me.

"You tell your CO that if there's any more of this last minute screwing around with our payload, we're filing a formal complaint. It isn't just a goddamned nuisance, it's a safety hazard."

I nodded numbly.

It took about fifteen minutes to unload supplies from the shuttle and re-load it with packs of meds,

monofilament and scientific glassware, then there was an agonizing delay while the pilots struggled and swore at the folding emergency seat and I watched with adrenaline pounding in my veins.

When the docking hatch finally thumped shut, I could barely believe it. I hung there stupidly in the empty bay, trying to feel some kind of triumph, but not succeeding. There went my job and maybe a lot more. The consortium could file criminal charges. Damn, I didn't want to think about that. Suddenly it seemed less important that Pajit was somebody's son. That my son spent a year at a time in Toronto without me and I hoped to God that if he got in trouble some stranger would look out for him.

Two guys from Geir's watch turned up then, looking for me, and I felt my mood get heavier along with the gravity as we sank back to Level 1. In the office, Geir was making calls. He ignored me, so I slumped wearily in the chair and listened. Kagoshima spaceport was furious. HQ was incensed. Newsers had just picked up the "escape" story and they were overjoyed.

The door buzzed and Sam stuck his head in.

"Geir? Themba's awake. Medic says he's fine."

Geir grunted. Sam hesitated and gave me a look burning with curiosity. Behind him I caught a glimpse of other guys peering in. I looked away. Sam backed out.

The com chirruped with a coded priority call from the Consortium's Director of Operations. She sounded mad as hell.

"I very much hope that the rumors of an escape from Montgolfier are unfounded, Mr. Eldjarnsson."

"There's been no escape, ma'am. Just an...expedited early release."

I couldn't see the Director's face from where I sat, but her tone of voice was ominous.

"Release? And whose initiative was this?"

A heartbeat's pause, then Geir said:

"Mine."

"You've exceeded your authority."

"Ma'am, I believe that if you check all the records very carefully you might discover that my orders came from the Board of Directors. Yesterday."

My jaw dropped as I realized that Geir was asking the Director to bail him out.

"This sounds remarkably like blackmail."

"No, ma'am. Absolutely not." said Geir grimly. "It's simply the best answer I can come up with under the circumstances."

Another pause.

"I'll call you back."

The link went dead. Geir let out a gusty breath, leaned back and then spoke to me for the first time.

"Olmstead, as God is my witness, if they don't kill you, I'm going to string you up myself."

I was staring at him incredulously. "You didn't have to do that!"

He opened his eyes to glare at me.

"Let me get this straight. Are *you* telling *me* not to do something blind stupid just because I happen to think it's right?"

"Uh..."

The door buzzed again.

"I thought someone here might require the services of a lawyer," came Ben's sardonic voice.

I stood, feeling my face go hot.

"I owe you an apology..." I started.

Ben interrupted me.

"No need, old man. Must have been the hooch."

His smile didn't quite make it to his eyes, and his tone was a little too hearty. I offered him my chair but he shook his head and leaned against the wall. Geir filled him in.

"What do you think they'll do?" he asked finally.

"If you're lucky, nothing. The Consortium is very anxious to avoid any suggestion of mishap on their penitential flagship. Prosecuting the station commander or even a..." Ben gave me a sour glance. "...crusading Canadian would be difficult to explain. But you'll have to ensure that everybody up here tells the same story and nobody talks to newsmen. They'll be calling with offers if they haven't already."

"I cut non-priority communications forty minutes ago," said Geir, with a trace of satisfaction.

I wasn't thinking very straight. It took me a minute to add it up and realize that I'd been suiting Pajit up forty minutes ago. Geir had known. I found myself staring at him, feeling the first impossible glow of rising hope.

"What happens to Pajit now?" I asked, trying to keep my voice level.

"Kagoshima Security will probably send him to the nearest UN

camp.”

“I’ll talk to immigration...” I began, but Ben interrupted.

“There’s another option.” I turned in surprise. Ben didn’t look at me. He spoke to Geir. “I pulled some strings. If Pajit can pass an English proficiency exam, I believe I can arrange a European student visa. After that it’s up to him.”

He turned for the door, but I jumped in front of him and held out my hand.

“I’m sorry for what I said. Really. But thanks for making me so mad.” I managed a grin.

Ben hesitated, then took my hand reluctantly.

“Apology accepted,” he said gruffly.

I took my foot away from the door. He started to open it, then looked back at me and added in a slightly husky voice, “I believe your son will be very proud.”

Geir shuffled things on his desk until I could pull myself together, then told me that until he heard from dirtside I was on suspension and med review. It sounded wonderful.

When I pulled the door open I was glad I’d wiped my face because

the corridor was crowded with guys, all trying to look as if they just happened to be standing there. I could hear air recirc fans (Soyuz, discontinued 1989) whining under the unusual load. Themba was up front.

“Uh, look I’m sorry...” I started, but he interrupted me.

“What has happened?”

I held up crossed fingers and then broke into a grin.

“Geir backed me up.”

Someone cheered, then guys started slapping me on the back. Themba drummed the wall with his hands, making an eerie reverberation through the corridor. It was the most excitement I could ever remember seeing on the Mount.

I caught sight of Kahlifa leaning against the wall a little distance from the rest, and I walked over. I spoke deliberately loudly

“Buy you a coffee?”

He hesitated, giving me one of those inscrutable looks.

“No, don’t tell me,” I said.

“*Inshallah*. Right?”

His face split into a big smile.

“Allah is merciful. I take four sugars.” 🍁

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## In upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, look for new work by L.E. MODESITT, JR., EDO VAN BELKOM, VOL RANGER, MELISSA HARDY, TERRY HAYMAN, HOLLY PHILLIPS, A.M. DE GIORGIO, CATHERINE MACLEOD, MICI GOLD, JOY HEWITT MANN, JOHN CRAIG, E.L. CHEN, MICHAEL VANCE, D. PETER MACLEOD, JAMES KEENAN, and many more!



*Some cadets would do anything to advance a chair  
in the orchestra. But did one kill for it?*

# Sonata in Weapons

Linda J. Dunn

LUCI LEANED HER STUN RIFLE AGAINST THE DIRT wall of the foxhole and unpacked her viola. She sat down on the spongy earth, savoring the musty scent of the walls around her. A laughing bird chuckled in a tree nearby, filling the air with a melody so sweet and alien that no human composer could ever hope to capture its beauty.

After four years at PAX's military conservatory in Maryland, Luci still couldn't shake the feeling that she was living on an alien world. She'd never set foot outside the city before arriving at Patuxent River, and the rural environment had been a shock to her senses. She hadn't expected the military conservatory at the academy to be anything like the Bostonian kibbutz she left behind; but she was still totally unprepared for the wild variations in nature that didn't exist within the sterile environment of her childhood classrooms. The standard western even-tempered scale consisted of twelve notes. Always. Beside her, the laughing bird warbled out its chuckling melody in a scale clearly composed of seventeen, not twelve, notes.

Luci picked up her bow and contemplated her odds of success in this final competition. The viola was a fretless instrument, more analog than digital, and allowed her to capture the music of nature more readily than the other instrument she could play. Unfortunately, the one in her hands now was a sterile military-issued viola of metal alloy that could survive being bashed against a brick wall without a scratch; and it produced exactly the kind of sound that would make a true musician want to shatter it against that wall. Whoever decreed the musical quality produced from this was comparable to that of the old-style wooden violas was deaf, stupid, or both.

Fortunately, she'd made a deal with the devil, also known as Cadet Eric

Shelton, to borrow his viola for the competition in return for certain favors that included sitting in this foxhole when he was supposed to be the one sitting here.

Luci made a face at the viola and started playing the sonata she intended to submit for the final competition. The library chip, a part of Luci's mind since her arrival, intruded on her consciousness and nudged her back to traditional styles. Bach, Mozart, Strauss, Bartok, and all the other maestros of past centuries wouldn't have this problem. They, however, only had to worry about starvation if the masses didn't like their work. At no time did anyone ever tell them the only venue for a professional performer was the government-funded and controlled orchestras—and if you didn't like it, you could enjoy music as a hobby.

Luci shut her eyes tightly, pushing against the suggestions from the chip. *The fools don't even understand what they've lost, let alone why they've lost it.*

The sound of footsteps—muted whispers on the spongy earth—moved closer and she checked her watch, startled to realize her patrol was almost over. Mac would be approaching—another lost cause who had turned in a composition that barely met the requirements because, as he put it, he was too far behind and the only way he could win third chair on his chosen instrument was if ten other saxophone players suddenly drowned during maneuvers.

"There's trouble back at the barracks," Mac said.

"What kind?"

"Eric Shelton's dead. Suicide. I think you just made fourth chair."

"Eric? But why? He was always first. Wing Choi could never even come close competing against Eric." Lucianne stared up into Mac's eyes, hoping against hope that this was another one of Mac's set-ups for some sick joke.

"Eric may have been first in the orchestra, but he was struggling with academics. The pressure must have finally gotten to him. He—"

Mac hesitated and Luci waited, wondering what could possibly make it worse.

"He smashed his viola."

Luci's stomach twisted into knots and her voice, when she finally managed to speak, came out as a faint whisper. "Can it be repaired?"

"I'm sorry. I know you had a deal with him to use his viola during competition, but it's shattered."

Luci stared off into the distance, trying to figure out how she felt. Eric was never a friend, occasionally an enemy, and always a competitor who didn't believe the rules applied to him. She couldn't force herself to feel anything over his death other than bitterness over the loss of the viola and certainty that the only reason he'd done it was to twist the knife he'd planted in her back four years ago, one last time.

"Did he leave a note?" she asked.

"Not exactly a note," Mac said. "He called his sonata *Death at the Academy*. Nobody thought anything about it when he turned it in, but now—"

Luci closed her eyes and leaned her head against the dirt wall. It was

hopeless. Without that borrowed viola, there was no chance she could advance to third chair. She'd put all her dreams into one sonata based on the capabilities of Eric's antique viola; and now she'd be forced to play it with a standard, military-issued viola.

Several words formed on her lips, but what she finally said was, "Thanks for telling me."

"I wouldn't want you to walk into something like that unprepared. Everyone's a little crazy right now. Wing's locked himself in his room and his roommate is on the other side of the door, screaming that his clarinet is inside and he needs to practice."

"Bet he's upset."

"Sure is. He's fourth chair. The pressure's real intense."

With that statement, Mac's earlier words hit home. She was fourth chair now. Luci braced herself against the wall, hating the feeling of elation flowing through her body and wishing she could grieve for Eric.

She returned to the dorm she shared with Twyresa, a flutist of little talent whose place was secured by connections, not ability. Half-eaten and abandoned food rested on Luci's bed, not Twyresa's, and old-fashioned music sheets were scattered haphazardly around the room.

Luci bit back anger and scooped everything from her side of the room and tossed it onto Twyresa's bed before heading down to the cafeteria for a breakfast filled with too-greasy, inedible offerings and gossip that didn't go down any

better than the food.

She sleepwalked through the day, partially due to exhaustion and partially due to the shock wave that rocked through the academy. It was difficult to believe such an outstanding musician would suicide. Difficult? Hell, it was impossible.

The same foxhole waited for her that night as she'd used the night before. The whole deal with foxholes was stupidly outdated, but whenever she challenged it, the instructors always replied with the one-word answer given to everything she challenged, "Discipline."

I could learn discipline just as well inside a well-lit and insulated building.

No mimic echoed her notes tonight, and if a bird sang nearby, she didn't hear it. The only music Luci heard tonight was the sonata playing in her head. She danced the bow across the four strings of the viola, struggling to keep pace with the sonata playing in her mind. When she finished, she knew she had finally created something truly original that captured the beauty of the landscape around her. The instructors preferred works that were airy and light, whereas hers was dark. Still, the music was full of power and she felt confident that even the usual prejudices of the judges would not stand between her and third chair.

Luci played the sonata one more time with the library chip recording, and then uploaded the final work and sealed it for the competition.

Commandant Rowlett himself arrived as dawn beckoned. He

stared down at her and she immediately saluted.

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" he asked.

"Sir?"

"Your sonata."

"I don't understand, sir."

"That's Cadet Shelton's suicide sonata."

She stared up at Rowlett, words lost upon her lips and confusion fogging her brain until she couldn't think what she could possibly say. "It's my sonata," finally stumbled out. "Mine. I've been struggling with this for days."

"No. It's Cadet Shelton's sonata. He recorded it in the library before his death. Tap into the library. Go ahead."

He folded his arms across his chest and waited. Luci knew, even before she tried, what she would find in the library. It was her work, only slightly altered—an earlier version that wasn't, at least not in her mind, as strong as the final composition.

"Do you know the penalty for stealing the work of another?"

"I didn't steal it. I never heard Eric's recording until just now. I wrote this myself."

Rowlett stared at her for a time that seemed to stretch into infinity. "When do you claim that you first began this composition?"

"About two weeks ago, but I finished it last night. It's my style. Have someone check my personal library storage. That'll prove it's mine."

He stared a few moments longer before turning away. "Report to my office after breakfast. Don't bother

going to your classes."

Luci entered the cafeteria a few minutes later and all heads turned. When she sat down at a table, conversation stopped and everyone suddenly stood up and moved away. She sat alone, eating slowly and refusing to look away whenever someone stared in her direction.

Now she could understand why Eric killed himself. He must have known the truth would come out, but why steal from her in the first place? Why not confess before killing himself? And how did he ever manage to pull this off? What did he have to gain from stealing her music? His works were always spectacular and distinct—maybe a little too distinct. Had he been cheating all along?

Eric wasn't the type who could steal records from another cadet's library chip. It wasn't that he was too noble. He simply wouldn't know how. So if he didn't do it, who did?

Someone who wanted third chair? Wanted it badly enough to kill one person and frame another for plagiarism? That meant Brenda or Tera. Both moved up with Eric's death, and casting suspicion upon her eliminated all reasonable competition. How could she hope to convince Rowlett that she was innocent and someone else must have stolen her sonata and placed it in the library in Eric's name before killing him?

She never even got a chance.

"Stealing from the dead is an unpardonable sin," Rowlett said.

"It's my sonata," Luci said. "You

must have found the evidence in my personal files."

Rowlett's gaze never faltered. "We've checked your records and there's nothing there at all." He leaned forward and Luci stared into deep blue eyes that cared nothing about her and everything about the reputation of his precious academy. "The same is true for Cadet Shelton. It's as though both sonatas suddenly appeared out of the blue, without any preliminary work. Highly irregular."

"But I—"

"You do not have permission to speak."

Luci clenched her hands into tight fists and felt her fingernails biting into the palm of her hands. It was unfair and totally wrong. This was her sonata, but she couldn't prove it.

"I asked security to investigate and they assure me that your records have not been accessed except by you. However—"

He leaned back in his chair and his gaze shifted, growing softer. "Ah, Luci, it must be tragic to be born a century or more too late. In a different era, you would have been one of those rare child prodigies that the rich made into pets and provided with toys. Give you an instrument you've never seen before, and within the day, you can play it like most professionals; which is not to say that you can play it as well as required by PAX's high standards. You've made fifth chair in how many instruments now?"

"Ten," Luci said, looking down at her feet. She could have achieved as much in a few dozen more if she'd

wanted to try; but why bother? The instructors already referred to her as the generalist who couldn't comply with regulations.

"You're a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, Cadet Duplessy. What are we to do with you?"

Luci stared into his eyes. "It was *my* sonata."

"I know that," he said. "Who else here would dare break all the rules like that? Certainly not Eric. The very reason he was first chair was because he had a natural gift for imitation, rather than originality."

Rowlett sighed heavily and looked at the notepad on his desk. "It would be better for you and the rest of the world if I dismissed you. The reason the government took over the entertainment industry was to save the world from people like you, who challenge us to look at all of reality and not just the pleasant aspects. Look what a mess the world was in, even at the beginning of the millennium, before the government began censoring the performing arts."

"We've lost much in the process," Luci said, half-surprised at herself for daring to voice her thoughts aloud.

"But look what we've gained," Rowlett said. "All crime statistics are down and dropping ever lower as violence becomes a part of our dimly remembered past. Someday, we won't even have armies anymore—just schools like this one and the usual disaster relief units."

He paused and stared at Luci for a moment. "You're too young to remember, whereas I'm too old to forget. Maybe you'll feel a little



differently after I tell you that Eric Shelton didn't kill himself."

"But the cameras—"

"Tapes can be modified, and I think these were."

"But who? And why?"

"That's what I want you to help me discover," Rowlett said. "I'm convinced there's a cheating ring here. Some of our students, like your roommate, should have washed out long ago. Instead, they've managed to keep their places by producing compositions that far exceed their ability. I tracked it to Cadet Shelton before he died. Someone killed him to cover his tracks and that same someone probably substituted your sonata for Cadet Shelton's real one so he could sell Shelton's sonata to another viola player. Now my thought is that this person is probably greedy enough to go after some bait I intend to dangle in front of his face."

"Bait?"

"You've never fished?"

"Kill animals?"

He smiled. "Ah—the generation gap reveals itself again. Let's just say that if you want to graduate, you're going to have to write another sonata. Use a synthesizer and put some of the more popular instruments into it. Your roommate is gone, so if you start now, and walk out of here with an expression that will make rumors fly, we should be able to set a trap that will bring murder and mayhem to your doorstep. Maybe then you'll understand why it is that true genius is no longer valued if it cannot be confined within our regulations."

Luci shook her head. "I do not understand. Are you saying I'm supposed to write this sonata and someone is going to try to kill me to get it?"

"That's what I hope," Rowlett said. "Don't worry. I'll have people watching and you're the top student in martial arts."

"What if I refuse?" Luci asked.

Rowlett leaned forward and his eyes were hard and cold. "I'll wash you out of this program so fast that you'll be out of here yesterday."

Luci stared at him for a long moment, half-tempted to tell him exactly what he could do with his precious program, which rejected originality and rewarded blandness. She stood up, never looking away from his face. Eric was more enemy than friend—but she wanted whoever killed him stopped.

"I haven't much choice, have I, sir?"

"No, cadet, you haven't." He turned back to the work on his desk, dismissing her without even bothering to ask if she agreed to risk her life to catch Eric's murderer.

Luci turned and left the room, heading to her dorm. People stepped out of her way, giving her a wide berth. Tears ran down her face as she half-ran and half-walked across the campus. Eric's death had been a shock when he'd killed himself, but now—how could anyone kill another human being? They did it in practice all the time, but those were just maneuvers and no one ever really expected to do this in real life.

She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling a cold chill rush

through her body despite the warmth of the sun filtering through the window into the dorm hallways. Obviously, someone did take those maneuvers seriously.

Twyresa's clutter had strayed into her territory again and this time Luci looked at it for a long moment from the doorway before picking up the mess and tossing it onto Twyresa's bed. Why would anyone use paper music sheets? Or waste so much time and effort fixing her hair into some old-fashioned style that would just be destroyed during morning exercises?

Someone knocked at the door and Luci started forward, then hesitated. *If that's the murderer, he's here too soon. I haven't even started the sonata.*

"Sir, this plebe is delivering a synthesizer to you, sir."

Luci moved forward slowly and checked through the viewer before unlocking the door. "Thank you," she said.

Stealing from the masters was an old quick-and-dirty solution for beginning students and if you filed off the serial numbers carefully and reworked the notes properly before switching instruments, you could have what passed for an original creation without much effort. Most of the students did it this way. Luci was one of the few who insisted on beginning with a blank slate. Fortunately, she'd composed a dozen sonatas in her mind and stored them on the chip without uploading them. It was a simple task to take one of her earlier efforts and modify it to meet Rowlett's need. She used the synthesizer to record it and

prepared to upload to the library when she realized that this would be listed as Luci Duplessy's final composition. *Do I really want this on my record?* As a competition piece, it was as good as any other, but it lacked originality and that's why she'd abandoned it.

The academy wanted elevator music, not original compositions. They wanted tunes that were light and airy. *All right. Let's give them what they want with that unique Duplessy twist that hits them where they least expect it.* Luci bit back a grin at the crisis-inspired thought. Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* had cannons for effect. What would happen if she wrote a light and airy composition, using arc cannons, laser rifles, and the pings and splats of the fake artillery weapons they used in practice? She'd write it, encrypt it and then add a time stamp. Forward it to Rowlett and then the academy's legal department and they wouldn't be able to open it without her key, but she could prove she finished on time and within their requirements. The sonata didn't *have* to be for your selected instrument. It's just that few people ever got away with originality. Few? Hell, none!

Two sonatas in one night? Well, if I'm a genius, why not?

The sonata in weapons, oddly enough, flowed from her mind to the keys more effortlessly than anything she'd ever written in the past. *If only they were all like this.* She looked up at the window after finishing, amazed to find it was dark outside. Was it pure adrenaline that made her last work so effortless or was it something else—confidence—

that she'd never felt before?

Luci secured the documents and uploaded them, and then collapsed into bed for a much-needed rest. She was just starting to drift off to sleep when Rowlett's words drifted back into her head. Bait. She was a piece of cheese in a mousetrap. One of her classmates or an instructor could be standing on the other side of her door right now, armed to the teeth and ready to break into her room.

Damn Rowlett. He sent me a synthesizer and what I really needed was a stun rifle.

Luci stood up and walked to Twyresa's footlocker. It wasn't difficult to pick the lock, and she'd done that a few times in the past, when she wanted to recover something Twyresa had "borrowed" from her and "forgotten" to return.

There was something she needed now more than ever before and she was desperate enough to take the risk. A Stay-Awake patch. Normally, she'd never consider such a thing, but she'd gone a long time without sleep and she needed to be awake. Never mind that Rowlett thought he had her closely watched and guarded. She wasn't trusting her life to anybody.

Luci rolled up her sleeve and applied the patch. Nothing happened for a few moments; then she felt adrenaline racing through her body. Her mind was wide awake. Lucid. Racing. The stay-awake drugs flowed through her body, blaring Reveille. Everything was in slow motion.

Damn! That was not a Stay-Awake patch. What kind of drug

had she taken?

Luci sat down on the side of her bed and waited, watching the clock tick away hours in a single minute and finding her mind twisting and flowing with possibilities for concertos that had never occurred to her before. Speed-alpha. That had to be what this was. Nothing else could have that kind of creativity. Well, at least this cleared Twyresa from being involved in Eric's death. Her short bursts of creativity were obviously due to drug use. It was against regulations and she'd be dismissed, but she wasn't a murderer.

So who is?

It seemed forever before someone knocked at her door.

"Luci? Can you stand some company?"

"Mac? What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't stand to see you shunned like this. I figured you needed a strong shoulder to cry upon right about now."

Luci swung the door open. "You don't know how good it is to see someone who doesn't—" Her words died on her lips and the smile faded when she saw the stunner Mac pointed at her.

"Sorry, Luci. One of the little sacrifices I have to make for my career. I'm sure you'd understand if I had the time to explain it to you."

He fired and Luci collapsed at his feet. He dragged her back into the room and closed the door. Mac dropped a bag on the bed and turned his attention to the cameras.

"I must have missed my true calling in the theatrical guild."

Luci lay on the floor, not moving.

She didn't dare respond or he'd fire again. How much of her body was really stunned and how much was being kept fluid by the drug was something she didn't even know herself.

Mac finished doing whatever he was doing outside her line of sight. She couldn't turn her head to watch but her hearing—that was the unmistakable sound of a bag being set on the nightstand. A moment later, she heard the sound of a small box open and the click of metal.

"Slicing a vein is always so messy. Right now you're probably expecting me to explain why you're about to die. Sorry. I don't believe in wasting time on things like that."

He moved closer and she saw a shoe carefully encased in disposable environmental protective gear. The covering would catch all the splattered blood and he could toss it into the bin on his way out, leaving himself trace-free of any part in her death.

Everyone would believe it was suicide except Commandant Rowlett.

Who will they choose for bait next? Or will they simply cover up everything to protect the academy's precious reputation?

Mac bent over and grabbed her under the arms, dragging her to the bed. Luci caught her foot on a chair, knocking it over. Mac bent to pull her foot loose and she moved fast—or at least, as fast as she could.

Surprise was a weapon that could be used only once and Mac outweighed her by at least fifty pounds. Luci aimed as best she could, hoping her foot connected between his

legs. She missed and caught the back of his legs, sending him sprawling. She'd lost.

The drug could partially counteract a stun, but she wasn't working at full capacity. Her fingers and toes tingled with the feeling of a thousand needles prickling them and her legs and arms felt wooden.

Think fast.

She struggled to her feet, fighting to force herself to stand upon feet she couldn't feel. Everything ached. Her fingers couldn't curl into fists anymore. Her vision blurred. Everything hurt and nothing felt natural.

Think faster.

"Tried to play a trick on me, didn't you?" Mac said, standing up and facing her. "Well, I guess I'm going to have to change my plans. Too many bruises. You'll just have to disappear now."

His words didn't touch her. Nothing did. She was frozen and floating high above the floor, almost unable to move at all. Only the drug and pure adrenaline kept her upright at all.

He would move soon. What was he waiting for? Did he know she was almost helpless? That a few more minutes and she'd topple without effort?

"A Stay-Awake patch doesn't last very long against a stunner."

Okay. He knew.

"And if you got into Twyresa's harder stuff, then you should know that it's potent, but doesn't last very long. You should be falling over real soon now. All I have to do is wait."

She wanted to fall. Her body

already thought it was horizontal. Everything was so blurred that she could barely hear his voice. She forced her left hand to move a few inches. The neck of the viola lay on the bed and when Mac turned and bent over to pull something out of his bag, Luci grabbed the viola. Was it the drug or her own body, fighting for mad survival, that caused time to slow around her? Everything was slow motion again with her arm moving ever so slowly as she swung, pushing against resistance from the air around her, until the viola crashed hard against Mac's head.

He fell.

Time flowed fast again and she felt herself lifting out of her body and standing aside to watch this image of herself bash the viola against Mac's head again and again.

The door burst open and she looked up to see Commandant Rowlett standing there with the military police. He smiled and said, "Well, I see the cavalry's a little late." His eyes took in the viola, her blood-splattered figure, and Mac's body and he added, "See! The military-issue violas are better than those antiques you favor. If Cadet Shelton had used one of these instead of his wood viola—"

Luci staggered forward. "You—"

The next thing she knew, she woke up in the infirmary.

GRADUATION DAY DAWNED HOT and beautiful. Laughing birds settled in the trees near the ceremony grounds and somehow a mimic managed to slip past the protective fence and both delight and

startle the visiting dignitaries who didn't expect to hear their whispered conversations shouted back at them by some furry little creature.

Luci stood in formation with the other waiting cadets, anxious to receive her medallion and learn her class standing.

She glanced sideways only once. The formation had holes that Rowlett elected not to fill. Let those gaps serve as a reminder to the undergraduates that cheating and violence would never be tolerated.

Several students were dismissed and some were arrested. Mac was gone without a trace and no one knew what fate awaited him. Rumors flew through the campus about who resigned and why; but no one, least of all the instructors, would ever confirm or deny any of those rumors.

Luci stared down at her glove-encased hands. In her mind's eye, they were still caked with blood and no amount of scrubbing could ever remove the stains from her hands. It hurt to think how she'd felt while hammering Mac with that viola again and again until Rowlett arrived. Exhilaration. Joy. Pure euphoria. No wonder violence was so common in centuries past.

The doctors said Mac would probably live, although what kind of life he'd have after surgery and therapy was something she didn't want to consider.

She'd rewritten her sonata after that. The judges allowed it. A special exception, they'd said. The resulting sonata was light and airy and carried not a hint of darkness or



power. It did, however, have a scale of seventeen notes and that alone had raised more than a few eyebrows during judging. The elevator music with weapons was something she'd tossed at Rowlett as a challenge. He'd seemed first amused, and then intrigued by it, and pronounced her record cleared of all suspicion.

The Admiral selected to address the cadets droned on and on until Luci began to wonder if his intention was to kill the entire academy from boredom. Finally, his speech ended and he began moving through the ranks, his officers beside him.

One by one, the cadets stepped forward, saluted, received their medallions, and returned to the line.

"Lucianne Duplessy."

She stepped forward and saluted. The Admiral returned her salute.

Another officer stepped forward and pinned a medallion upon her shirt. She stepped back, desperate to know her standing, but unable to look at her own medallion without breaking form.

"Congratulations, Lieutenant," the Admiral said before calling the next cadet.

Straining her neck, Luci tried to read the medallion. She looked at Wing in formation beside her. He grinned and mouthed, "What am I?"

"First chair, viola." Luci mouthed back. "What am I?"

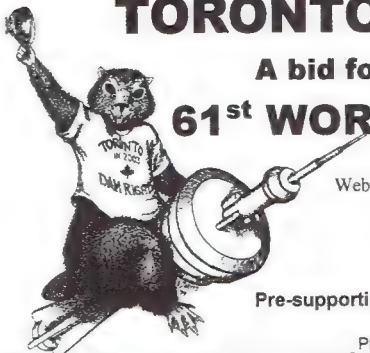
He stared for a moment and burst into laughter. Heads turned and he immediately snapped back to attention.

She waited a few moments and turned back to look. Wing was still struggling with laughter but he finally managed to mouth the words, "First chair, weapons." 🍁

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*All kinds of conditions precipitate homicide, but when you have two different species involved, and a third trying to solve the crime, "Why dunnit?" becomes the key question.*

# Alien Intents

Marianne O. Nielsen

Oland was grading the 81st student term paper out of 233 waiting in the computer file when the secretary of the Criminology Department peered around the door frame to timidly announce that there was a Kohoet in the Department Office and it? he? wanted to see Dr. Oland...*now*.

Oland, overwhelmed by misused theories and dead-wrong observations on "the media's role in the development of the fear of crime," had to blink a few times to clear his head. The secretary glanced over her shoulder. "Here he comes! I told him to wait but..." She made a face and Oland pushed his chair back. If the Kohoet approaching was who Oland thought it was, then "he" was actually a "she," but the secretary (and probably 98% of human beings) couldn't tell the difference. As it was, there was only one Kohoet who would come looking for him; there was only one Kohoet who knew him on a face to...beak basis.

The secretary made a squeaking noise and hurried away. Looming in the doorway was Kah'hatten, Elder of the Kah-Hochut Clan, and the one member of that avian species Oland had grown to understand enough to know that he didn't understand them. Even after working with her and members of her Clan last year to solve a particularly gruesome murder.

Kah'hatten made a bird-like bobbing motion of her head. Oland bowed his head, the closest human equivalent to this Kohoet sign of respect. He stood back and the Kohoet stepped into his office. Kah'hatten looked about, her gaze lingering on a reproduction of a Michael Cardinal watercolor that hung above the com center. Kohoet had a fascination with human fine arts—not to mention not-so-fine arts, and some stuff that, in Oland's opinion, was really appalling junk.

The Kohoet looked older, her crest feathers more faded, her stride less

vigorous than when Oland had seen her last.

Oland motioned towards the rug in front of his desk. "Perhaps you'd like to sit here?" The Kohoet stepped over to the rug and settled her large ostrich-like body, ruffling her bronze and rusty red feathers slightly as she did so.

"*Ah hat ho hent*; I'm honored that you enter my nest," Oland said as he sat down, hoping he had said the greeting without too ugly an accent.

The Kohoet's crest rose, a sign Oland knew, of curiosity. "Th-ihs place you live is sm-ahll," she said.

Oops, Oland thought. Wrong greeting. He smiled. "Actually this is where I work. I live in an apartment. I'll have to show you some time."

The Kohoet made a clicking sound of amusement. "The phrase, th-en, you seek is '*Ah hat ho tahten hat*'; I am h-onored to greet you."

"Thank you. I'll remember."

The Kohoet continued to survey the room. Her gaze lingered on the vidscreen, the shelves of old books, the collection of Hopi Kaatsina dolls. "Some of those carvings lo-ook like birds," she noted.

"Yes," Oland said. "They represent spirits who are agents of social control among the Hopi. My favorite's the mouse warrior." He pointed to a short, rotund, brown figure with whiskers, a tail and a bow.

The Kohoet's crest stood up a little taller, then sank. "We wi-ihll save this discussion for another time." She blinked twice, a slow movement more lizard-like than bird-like. "I came to h-ask you

h-elp with two killings."

Oland's smile stilled. "You mean *solving* two killings—I hope." The Kohoet had evolved from predatory stock and killing prey was a normal part of adolescence—as was learning to control those instincts. Rather like human young people learning to control their sex drive, if you got right down to it. Unfortunately, last year, a Kohoet "teen-ager," unable to control his hormonally-based urges, had killed a human. The Edmonton Police Service called on Oland, a cultural criminologist, for help in solving the murder. He had later assisted the Kohoet in developing several alternative treatment strategies.

The Kohoet blinked. "Yes. I cannot imagine wha—at else you would think."

"Er, nothing." Oland felt a slight blush of embarrassment. "Who has been murdered? Not a human...?"

"Two of our young people. Not on Earth," she added.

The Kohoet were very attached to their young people, and often brought them on their long voyages. The murder of two of them must have been a terrible blow to their Clan. "Not yours...? Oland asked.

"No," the Kohoet agreed. "But we-e are faced with a difficult situation. Their Clan is demanding restitution from the Teledt, but the Teledt, these...people, do not seem to understand wha-at they must do. And what action we must take if they don't do as they should."

A loud beep sounded from Oland's computer screen. He glanced down. Out off Kah'hatten's

line of sight, the secretary's image appeared and the words "The Chair wants to know—do you need help with your visitor?" ran across the top of his screen. The secretary's image in the vidscreen reflected obvious apprehension and a touch of excitement. She was too new to know the exact details of last year's incident (though she was going to get the scoop from her lunch mates later today, no doubt), but the lordly Chair asking her to check up on him would be more than enough to rouse her curiosity.

Oland shook his head slightly.

She looked disappointed and her image blinked off.

"Sorry," he said to Kah'hatten. "The Teledt...? You said the Teledt killed two Kohoet? Who are the Teledt?"

Kah'hatten looked at Oland's vidscreen with contempt. "I cannot show you on *tha*-aht thing. You will come with me."

Oland looked at the term paper that still dominated his screen: "The ancient media art of T.B. produced many a great new innovation..."

"You've convinced me," he said. The papers could wait a day, and an opportunity like this to learn about yet another sentient species was not something to be missed. The Kohoet were interstellar travelers and very close-mouthed... Oland glanced at Kah'hatten while he pulled on his coat. Close-beaked...about themselves and their knowledge of the greater universe. He knew at least four xeno-anthropologists and a score of sociologists who would give up their first-born—maybe even a graduate assistant—for this

opportunity.

THE KOHOET COMPOUND WAS located in southern Alberta, about 400 kilometers southeast of Edmonton. At the speed Kohoet run, Kah'hatten could have covered the distance in seven or eight hours, but instead Oland and Kah'hatten flew in a small specially-adapted plane with Kah'hatten piloting. On the way, Kah'hatten told him what little they know about the deaths. Two children dead, trampled to death. No other information was available, and the Kohoet didn't know how to get more, Oland gathered from Kah'hatten's reluctant comments.

The compound near the landing strip was a gutted and renovated motel that now served as the Earth home of the Kah-Hochut Clan.

"I am honored that you enter my nest," she said to Oland.

He bowed. It was much as he remembered it from his visit last year. The inside was still full of tapestries and layered rugs, junk, art and artifacts scattered everywhere. Kah'hatten led him across the converted ballroom/lobby to the far wall, where she tugged on a tapestry that slid aside to reveal the smooth brown surface of a communication panel. She hooted and a section of the surface lit up. She made a short clicking noise and a figure appeared in front of the surface. It rotated slowly, showing a short, spindly-legged, more or less human-appearing creature. It had three-fingered hands, and its long jaw suggested that it had a ruminant somewhere in its genetic ancestry. A small knob protruded above each

large eye, like a vestigial antler.

"Is this the Teledt who killed the young people?" Oland asked.

"No. This is just a Teledt, so that you can see what they loo-ok like. We cah-nnot get images of the actual killers. Their authorities are protecting them." The scene shifted and began to move. "These are files from our knowledge banks." A flow of Teledt paraded in front of the surface, fading into and out of view. Kah'hatten clicked again and a murmur of noise swelled into the sounds of a busy city street. Bleating sounds seemed to be snatches of conversation. A Teledt darted across the street in front of some kind of vehicle. "They are swift," Kah'hatten said, "but not fit."

*Not fit.* A shiver ran up the back of Oland's neck; the first time he'd heard that phrase, it had been in connection with the grisly death of the human who'd had the misfortune to be considered "fit" to hunt by an out-of-control young Kohoet ...who could run well over 80 kilometers an hour.

"And several of these 'slow' beings caught and killed two Kohoet youngsters?" Oland asked, his tone doubtful.

"We h-ave their bodies. They were trampled." Kah'hatten's voice was more hollow than usual. "It is important that we know the Clan of the killers to demand restitution for their deaths."

Oland looked at her. There was a missing link of logic in her statement—what happened to investigating the crime?

Kah'hatten was still speaking, "We are not accustomed to

ha-ndling a killing of our own kind."

Oland could well imagine. The Kohoet had not exactly been forthcoming about their military or other coercive capabilities, but considering they were a predator species with interstellar travel and small niceties like personal force-shields, their capacity for violence was undoubtedly impressive—and seldom tested.

"And you wish my help to...?"

"Identify the Clan and to talk to them. We-e cannot make them understand."

Oland nodded. "But what about *why* the youngsters were killed?"

Kah'hatten's crest sank. She sat very still, then bobbed her head. "I had not considered that. Yes, perhaps it would be useful. To prevent another occurrence."

Oland gave a quick mental shake of his head. Just when he thought he was beginning to understand them ...how could any individual, any society, *not* be curious about the motive for a crime? How could they not know how to investigate a criminal act? He made a mental note to pursue the subject later. He looked at the other Kohoet who had drifted up to watch their conversation. There was only one youngster among them. But even one was a good sign. The Kohoet must be having some luck with the new kill-replacement therapies that he had helped them develop to keep their young people from attacking strange species. The adults intermittently ruffled their feathers and softly clicked and chirped among themselves.



Maybe the Kohoet's lack of concern about the reason for the deaths was because their concept of justice was restitution- rather than retribution-based. The acknowledgment of wrong by the offender, or his or her family, signified there would be a change, and acknowledgment came from an offer of restitution—Oland suddenly wondered what would happen if an offer wasn't made, as in this case. He asked.

Kah'hatten looked at him with one eye then the other. "You-u have found the grit of the problem, Oland. It has been a long time. On our homeworld long ago this happened, but not often. Now wrongdoers confess; it is the best way, for if the Clan did not come forward, the killed's Clan would name three Clans among who-om they thought might be the offender. And kill them all."

Oland heard the words but it took a few seconds for them to sink in. "Kill them *all*? That could be over 60 people!"

Kah'hatten blinked. "No, many mo-ore. You see only a small number of our Clan here. The very aged, the young, the teachers, and others are not here."

Oland sat down. Marking those term papers had suddenly become a much more attractive proposition. Kohoet justice certainly presented an incentive for self-policing. No wonder the Clans always paid up.

He would have to visit the Teledt—my God! Interstellar travel! A few odd scientists and politicians had made a trip so far, but what a chance! He shook off the surge of

excitement. He would have to talk to the Teledt authorities and somehow make them understand. Maybe if he knew more about their justice system... But first, he had to get his Grad. Assistant to take over his classes!

TWO DAYS LATER, OLAND WOKE up in the University Hospital. The last thing he remembered was feeling an enormous weight on his chest, a sharp pain in the same region, then nothing. Elaine Kaminsky, captain of the Homicide Unit, and his old friend Detective Al Forrester were standing at the foot of his bed, deep in conversation. There was something up his nose...

Oland croaked. He tried to say, "To what do I owe this honor?" but all that came out was a mumble. The two heard, however, and broke off their discussion. Kaminsky pressed the call panel.

The nurse arrived and asked Oland nursely questions, checked the bed panel, said he was fine and just don't tire him out to his visitors. They looked conscientious and promised not to.

"What are you doing here?" Oland managed to whisper. The world and his voice felt thick... Then, groggily, "Better yet, what am I doing here?"

Forrester sat on the edge of the hospital bed. "You were brought in by four Kohoet. They ran you from their ship to the police station." He paused. "Nice ship. Never seen one up close like that before."

The captain gave Forrester an annoyed look. "I think they didn't

know where else to bring you. Kah'hatten knew we worked together from last time." She sat down in the chair. "The doctor says you're lucky you're not on life support. You have 14 broken ribs, *had* two collapsed lungs, and have several nastily bruised internal organs. You're not going anywhere for a while."

That explained the tube running into each nostril. He felt nothing in his throat, or chest for that matter, but suspected he wasn't going to like it when he did. that matter, but suspected he wasn't going to like it when he did. "What happened?" he asked. The world had a muffled, dull and thick quality to it.

Forrestor frowned. "Best we can tell, Kohoet ships start out at 10 gravities, and your acceleration couch didn't exactly fit human anatomy. Guess anti-gravity generators are still science fiction."

Oland tried to absorb this: ten gravities. Squashed. He'd been squashed like road kill on the highway of...interstellar travel...what a lousy simile...

The world abruptly went away.

WHEN NEXT HE WOKE, THE CAPTAIN was sitting beside the bed. She was dressed casually in a blue tunic and pantaloons.

"Hello. Nice you could make it," she said.

Oland smiled, then felt the pain in his chest. Every breath was accompanied by a tearing feeling. He breathed more shallowly. He'd been right; he didn't like what he felt. He focused on the captain. It was good to see her...but police cap-

tains usually don't wait beside hospital beds...

"Hi," Oland said. "Why're you here?"

The captain laughed. It was a nice laugh. "It's either me or the Department of Defense."

Oland must have looked as bewildered as he felt.

"You were *inside* one of the Kohoet space craft. When you're better, they'll want to grill you till your brain cells shrivel. Since the Kohoet 'hurt' you and delivered you to us, we convinced them that you were in need of police protection. At least for now."

Of course. God, this was getting complicated. And he still had to help the Kohoet. He tried to sit up in bed, but instead set off the bed monitors. A nurse hurried into the room. He gave the captain a reproachful look and touched a panel on the monitor.

Oland felt like he'd been hit by a body-sized pillow. "Can you bring Kah'hatten here?" he managed to ask the captain before the room faded away again.

KAH'HATTEN CAME THE NEXT DAY accompanied by another, younger, Kohoet, the one who had programmed the craft, but hadn't properly reprogrammed a couch to fit Oland's "peculiar" human shape. The data wasn't in their banks. In somewhat awkward English, the younger Kohoet expressed her regrets and apologies.

"It was an accident," Kah'hatten said.

"Yes," Oland agreed, but a thought niggled at his mind. Those

damned drugs were making his head too fuzzy...

The Kohoet's crest feathers were now vertical. "We did not know if you wou-ould demand restitution. Humans have different ideas of justice."

"I don't know about that," Oland said. "Intent's what's important. It's not a crime if you didn't mean to do it."

Kah'hatten's feathers settled. "We-e think the same."

The younger Kohoet bobbed her head and left. Kah'hatten knelt down beside the bed into a sitting position. She looked as if she was going to ask a question, but a strange face capped with a police helmet peered through the open door. Oland nodded somewhat painfully at the officer, who returned to his post.

Oland said, "I'm going to be in here for a while. How long can you wait with the Teledt thing?"

The Kohoet peered at Oland with one eye, then peered at the monitor. "Not long. The Clan is getting anxious and its younger members are urging action."

Oland muttered, "Then we'll have to solve it from here."

The Kohoet peered at the monitor again. "We cou-ould bring our communications center here." She paused. "I wi-ill speak to your captain. She will help us, I think."

Later that day, an orderly moved Oland to a new room. Two Kohoet finished doing mysterious things to a brown communicator panel as he was wheeled in. Kah'hatten, the captain, and Forrester waited for him.

"Kah'hatten has explained what you're trying to do. You know the Tel-whoever are not going to share their files with you? Or anyone. Cops are cops." The captain smiled, softening her words. "But you're going to tell me everything later, aren't you?"

Oland nodded, not displeased at the prospect. The nurse gave him voice control over the bed so he could move it into a slightly inclined position, then left.

Kah'hatten made a clicking sound and the panel activated. The captain's eyes widened at the Teledt street scene. "It's not just Defense that's going to want your butt after this," she said quietly. "You'll excuse us if we don't stick around."

Forrester winked and closed the door behind them.

Oland watched the Teledt go about their everyday lives. A Kohoet voice-over came and went. "I don't suppose you could get an English translation for that?" Oland eventually asked.

Kah'hatten clicked and chirped and a human voice now gave the voice-over. It sounded suspiciously like Oland's own. Also, English words were superimposed over Teledt shop signs.

"Can you do the same with the Teledt conversations?" Oland asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

"Not whe-ere there are so many." She hooted a series of notes and the scene changed to several Teledt sitting around a table in an eating establishment of some kind. The Teledt were dipping their snouts into what seemed to be elaborate

salads and discussing...politics? Or religion? Oland wasn't sure. Something to do with values, anyway. The word "should" appeared frequently in the conversation.

"Since you said the Teledt won't share their case information with you, is there anything like news accounts? Maybe we can get something from them.."

Kah'hatten touched the panel. A series of annotated images flowed rapidly. Kah'hatten stopped it and the account appeared, with English over-voicing:

*A minor incident in the city's park area was concluded when a group of children was <untranslatable> by <untranslatable> aliens. In the interests of a public sense of well-being, the authorities wish all group members to know the Kohoet are dead. The public is safe.*

Oland's initial excitement at finding the news story died down. Too bad they didn't follow the infotainment model of newscasting so popular on Earth. Then they'd know more than they ever wanted... well, they did actually know a little more. Apparently there had been a group of children involved. Maybe that's why the authorities were protecting them? As young offenders? Though the language of the announcement implied rather strongly the Kohoet had done something "untranslatable" to the youngsters..? He looked at Kah'hatten. No, let it wait. His head hurt. He asked to see more of the Teledt world. Maybe something *would* translate.

There were more street scenes, a tour of a large public building, then there was a scene from a park. Teledt lounged under trees. A group of small ones played some kind of noisy game that involved bouncing a ball off their heads, and a great deal of butting. They were watched by three chatting adult Teledt. Oland focused on the adults. There was something peculiar about them.

"Can we get a close-up of that group of adults?" he demanded. The Kohoet enlarged the scene. The adults had no protruding vestigial antlers.

Oland felt a small flash of excitement. "Are these females, do you know?" he asked.

The Kohoet peered at the scene and blinked. "It has never concerned me what their sexual characteristics are. Perhaps they are."

"Are there any Kohoet on Teledt now? Can you contact them and find out?"

Kah'hatten ruffled her feathers. "If it is of importance."

"It might be. And find out if Teledt males and females reside together."

The Kohoet's crest fell like the ears on a cat. "Not share a nest..." The concept seemed repugnant to her.

"Just ask, it's an idea, okay? I'll explain in a minute."

"It will take longer than that to get a message there and back."

"Okay." Oland was relieved; he felt drained. He half expected the officious nurse to bustle in and scold him. He continued to watch as various scenes of Teledt life

played out in front of him. Kah'hatten spoke softly to the panel.

"They will find out." Kah'hatten paused. "You know that we are not ...happy asking questions. It is a sign of weakness."

Oland nodded. So it was—from the Kohoet point of view. Their ancestors had lived in hunting packs, which meant admitting weakness to outsiders could invite attack. They used observation and analysis of artifacts instead to satisfy their occasional need to know about other species. He often wondered why Kah'hatten put up with his incessant questions. Of course, they were sure that humans were already inferior beings... The previous niggling thought surfaced and this time stayed put: not asking questions meant the Kohoet were probably highly prone to making mistakes in dealing with other species. Oland had heard about all kinds of situations on Earth, such as the incident where a Kohoet walked past the security guards at the White House, clueless about restricted zones. Luckily his force-shield had been working when the Secret Service tried to blow him away. Or, on a less serious note, the Kohoet pair who walked into a brothel in Thailand looking for soup, and caused a riot. Or Kah'hatten's shipmates squashing a human in their spacecraft quite recently... He winced. How many times had the Kohoet gotten themselves, or others, into deep shit because of this little cultural foible? The Teledt were in more trouble than they could imagine...

He must have fallen asleep

watching the holographic display.

"Yes, they are females," Kah'hatten announced, waking him. "And you were correct. They do not live in Clans. Most males live in solitary dwellings except for a few weeks of the year. Females live with other females and their young."

"Like elk do sometimes," Oland said.

Kah'hatten cocked her head.

"The Teledt evolved from ruminant stock," Oland said. "Not primate like us, or avian like you. I once had a professor tell me we'd never understand what it meant to be human until we could compare ourselves with another sentient species. She was right."

Kah'hatten knelt down beside Oland's bed and watched the flow of life before them. She broke the silence. "These pictures are telling you something."

Her statement sounded almost like a question, Oland noted, more sensitive now. Had she ever asked him a direct question? His thoughts were diverted by a scene of Teledt youngsters being escorted across a busy intersection by a group of females.

"Hmm. Maybe...do you have a scene of the site where the Kohoet were killed?"

Kah'hatten chirped and the scene changed. It was not far from the same park that Oland had seen earlier. There was the same open field in the distant background. There were no crime scene markers like those found on Earth. "You said the Teledt investigated the killing?" Oland asked.

"Yes, but they said it was the fault



of the Kohoet. Therefore not a crime. They would tell us nothing more."

"They *what*?" Oland tried to sit upright. A tearing pain in his chest quashed the attempt. "Why didn't you tell me this before?" he demanded.

Kah'hatten seemed unperturbed. Her crest only shifted. "Because it is not possible."

"Maybe your young people chased the children. Tried to kill them like that poor, confused kid of yours did here on Earth..."

"No, these young people had passed the testing. They would not ee-ven chase Hareet when offered."

"Maybe the treatment wore off!"

Now Kah'hatten *was* perturbed; her crest dropped flat to her head. "That is not possible. They might *want* to kill something, but these ones wo-ould not, could not, do it."

"There was no evidence they actually chased the kids?"

"The Teledt told us that much. They did not."

Oland was relieved when his meal interrupted, though not at the medicinally green and fibrous quality of it. If he had four stomachs and a cud to chew, maybe...he needed time to think about herd animals...

Thinking turned unintentionally into a nap. When he woke, the captain was back and the wall panel was quiet. She was in uniform, and despite her smile, more than a little tense.

"Defense is getting twitchy. They want to talk to you. Preferably yesterday."

Oland groaned. "Help?" he pleaded. He needed time to help

Kah'hatten. Once Defense got their hands on him...

The captain grimaced. "I'll see what I can do."

Oland saw Kah'hatten waiting outside as the captain opened the door and left.

"You are awake," the Kohoet stated.

"Yeah. And it's turning into a wonderful day."

The Kohoet looked at him with one eye, then the other. Sarcasm still escaped her. "Let's get to work. I need to see as many scenes of Teledt females with youngsters as you've got. There's something that's been bothering me..."

Kah'hatten blinked, then clicked and hooted. The wall panel lit up. In scene after scene, female Teledt, usually in groups of five to six, herded groups of rambunctious youngsters, usually in groups of 12 to 15. The children were never still. They bounced around like young kids—goats, that is. They were amazingly fast compared to human youngsters. Oland doubted an adult human track star could touch them in a race. The Teledt females did quite well, though. They weren't quite as agile as the youngsters, but they had a knack of being just a few steps ahead of any youngster that suddenly veered off from the group. Amused, Oland realized the females' actions reminded him of sheep dogs or cow ponies—except, of course, these were sentient beings who simply had some very different child-rearing practices.

Then a scene flicked by that galvanized Oland. "Stop! Play it back!"

Kah'hatten reversed and replayed the scene. In slow motion, a group of females coalesced in between a youngster and a large male who shouted and stamped and made threats that were mainly untranslatable. But the females understood. One lowered her head and hunched her shoulders, a second followed suit. The male abruptly shut up and started to back up. The group shifted forward and he turned and ran. The females stopped, talked for a minute, then shooed the child back to play with the others.

"Do you have any idea what that was about?" Oland asked Kah'hatten.

The Kohoet blinked. "No."

"Hmm, neither do I, but there was something odd about the females' movements. Okay. Let's see some more scenes." Oland settled back.

BY MID-AFTERNOON OLAND WAS sure he could teach a course in Teledt family development and child discipline, if the University ever asked. He had seen infants learning to run, "pre-schoolers" learning to count (base 6 instead of 10, he wasn't surprised to see), and overly quarrelsome children head-butted into submission by annoyed females. As he felt like his eyeballs would fall from his head, he also saw what he needed.

Many of the scenes so far had been incidental to Kohoet fascination with architecture, parks, statues and other works of beauty. Examining art work was another of their

alternatives to asking questions. Something about seeing true meanings in metaphors. No doubt it made sense to the Kohoet. And Jungian psychologists...

The object in this scene was the wall of a large open stockade-like space. It was intricately decorated with bas relief stalks of grain and tree trunks. Two adult males, swaying slightly, were watching a horde of older children. One adult whispered to the other and the two began a gradual approach from the side, perhaps hoping to remain unseen in the crowd. All the females escorting the children had their backs to the males. Yet—just as one male reached out to grab a child, a female ran in between them. The females bleated loudly and the crowd stopped moving. The males turned and ran. The relationship between Teledt males and their children seemed...abusive, by human standards. Maybe adult males could have caused the Kohoet youngsters' death?

Oland replayed it again and again, but nothing in the image gave him an answer. However, the actions of the female fascinated him. She had been moving *before* she saw the males. There was no doubt about it.

Oland turned his head on the pillow, then said to Kah'hatten, "We need a P.I., a private investigator, someone to get information for us."

Kah'hatten cocked one eye at him.

"We need information we can't get here. I want your people on Teledt to get us some answers."

Kah'hatten looked like she wanted to say something scathing, or at least ask a question but, of course, she didn't say a word. He told her the list of questions. She left the room.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, THE KOHOET returned. Her crest was flat and angry. "My Clan members believe I am ending the clarity of adulthood, but I have the information you want. There were no adult males at the crime scene. Ho'hanak and Ohanat talked to an authority member who wished currency. Then they did as you asked." She chirped, and a series of intriguing scenarios unfolded:

A single Kohoet, Ho'hanak, ran into view. He flashed across a busy street, barely avoiding several thundering, exhaust-belching road vehicles, then he paced down the sidewalk. The second Kohoet, Ohanat, emerged from a side street and ran silently up behind Ho'hanak, staring intently at his back as he followed. In the roar and belching fumes of traffic, and on the heavily populated sidewalk, there was little chance Ho'hanak could have heard or smelled Ohanat. He paced on, and Ohanat broke off. Then the scene was repeated, but this time it was a female Teledt being followed. But the result was different; within a few steps she seemed to tense up, and trotted a little faster. Ohanat kept pace. Without warning, the Teledt stopped, hopped sideways, and swung around to confront him. She lowered her head, ready to butt.

Ohanat hooted and ran off.

In the next scene, the Kohoet reversed their roles. Ho'hanak quietly walked up behind Ohanat, who was sitting on a bench in the midst of a large flower garden. There was a group of noisy young Teledt, carefully supervised, splashing and kicking around in a pond. Ho'hanak stood there for a minute. Ohanat obviously didn't hear or smell him. Nothing happened until Ho'hanak suddenly hooted loudly and ran off. Ohanat jumped, and shrieked something untranslated, obviously startled.

In the next scene, the being on the bench was a Teledt female. The pond was again occupied with happy youngsters. Ohanat came up quietly behind her. Again the results were different; within seconds, she got nervous, looked around, and then jumped up to confront the Kohoet, who simply nodded and strode off.

"You're sure the Teledts' senses are less keen than yours? You're not just being, you know, ethnocentric?"

"We know this. We are not ethnocentric; we *are* superior to them in the ways most important." Kah'hatten ruffled her head feathers.

Oland chose discretion over a lecture on social values. And he had no other source of information to go on. "Okay, and the Kohoet were really careful not to tip off each other in the control scenarios. So we know the first time she couldn't have smelled or heard him, but she might have seen him in a window;

the second time she definitely didn't see him, and they say she couldn't have smelled or heard him, so..."

"Bu-ut that could only mean..." Kah'hatten hesitated.

"She felt him." Oland finished the sentence.

Kah'hatten was silent for some time. Finally she spoke: "You are saying that the females are empathic." Not quite a question, but very close. Just a slight change in tone of voice was needed... Was this the normal Kohoet way of gathering information, or was she beginning to trust humans enough to ask questions? Or just him?

"Yeah, I think they are. The way the females were anticipating the runaway youngsters, the way they intervened in that kidnapping or whatever it was—the herd instinct developed to a higher level, I'd guess. And now we know they can feel other people, not just Teledt."

Kah'hatten sat up straighter. She considered the wall panel for a short time. "If you are correct, then the Teledt were also correct. Our young people did 'start it' as the Teledt claim."

Oland nodded, the drugs beginning to pull him under. "Yeah. They didn't actually chase any youngsters, but they wanted to, probably very badly. They were frustrated, angry, and longing. And the females protecting the kids felt all those negative, powerful emotions. They didn't know the Kohoet young people wouldn't—couldn't—attack, so the females attacked first."

"So we do not need to ask for restitution?"

Oland shrugged, then regretted the motion, despite the growing numbness. "The females were protecting their youngsters. Does that require restitution?"

Kah'hatten rose. "No," she said, looking down at the recumbent Oland. "I drink to you." —High praise from a Kohoet. She strode out of the room.

Oland turned his head, feeling his weight sink into the bed. The Kohoet would have to withdraw their youngsters from the Teledt homeworld, or add yet another step to the kill replacement therapy. And then there was the question of...questions, and trust...and social control structures on other worlds, and...but right now, he didn't really care. Another nap was imposing itself....and then he would have a long, pleasant talk with Kaminsky. Very pleasant indeed.

LATER THAT DAY, THE TWO KOHOET technicians removed the wall panel. Oland was sorry to see it go. If only he knew how to operate it. What a research resource it would be...

The captain arrived not long after. Her first words were, "The Defense Department..."

Oland groaned and shut his eyes. "...won't be bothering you again," she continued with a grin.

Oland opened his eyes. "But..."

She cut him off. "Kah'hatten and I arranged for the Defense techies to have a tour of the Kohoet ship, 'in gratitude for your assistance.' They got ten minutes. I told her not

to trust them much longer than that...not that it did 'em a lot of good." Her grin went from wide to wicked.

Oland looked questioning.

"Um, yes. Kah'hatten invited me along 'to supervise.' Every piece of technology was dead as a doornail, turned off..."

A picture of a round, brown, shiny room, furnished with only four fabric "nests," i.e. acceleration couches, and nothing else, passed through Oland's mind. "You two didn't!" he said.

"Well, all except one panel,

which read 'Welcome Humans.' " The Captain squared her hands as if framing a small sign high on the wall. " 'Course, the techies recorded everything but they were pretty disappointed. You don't want to know what the major said."

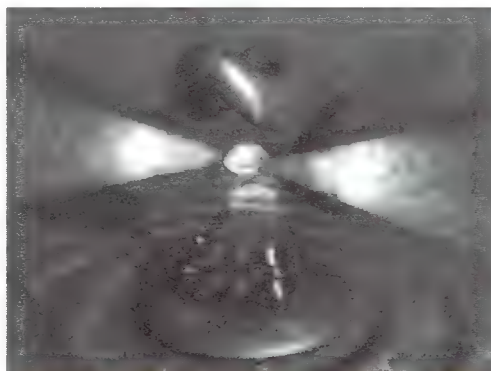
"I owe you," Oland said. Kah'hatten, too. He thought of the major stomping around the control room, glaring, cursing no doubt with fluency and frustration. Laughing hurt much worse than breathing, but he didn't care.

"Welcome Humans!" Oh, yes! He felt better already. 🌸

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*Her punishment was a thousand years of solitude. Finding out she had company was not the reprieve she thought it would be.*

# Nor Iron Bars a Cage

Leslie Brown

Her eyes and lips were gummed together. Her brittle hair crackled as she turned blindly towards the familiar hum.

"Elapsed time?" Her voice was a croak.

"Forty standard years, fifty-two planetary years." Gaoler's voice was reassuringly familiar.

"Good." She sat up stiffly. But there was a vast ache inside. She felt cool metal under her arms as Gaoler helped her stand. Sliding her feet across the floor, she made it to the recovery couch and settled back on its heated surface with a sigh. A straw was touched to her lips and she obediently sucked up the restorative liquid at the other end. She blinked in the subdued light.

"Still holding down the fort, Gaoler?" The machine, able to recognize a rhetorical question after a four-year real time association, did not reply.

"Any news from home, Gaoler? A pardon perhaps, a recall?"

"None, Citizen Rasmulah."

"As if I expected one. Gaoler, did he come? After?"

"The recordings of the perimeter are indexed and ready for viewing as per your request, Citizen Rasmulah."

WRAPPED IN A THICK ROBE, SHE SAT AT THE COMPUTER CONSOLE AND watched the perimeter vids chronologically. The first time he was surprised and then angry when the perimeter did not allow him to pass through. He stood there and shouted for her to come out. She watched over the weeks as the anger faded into despair and she waited for him to stop coming. Indeed the visits dwindled from daily to weekly but they never stopped. He would sit on the rock, the same place he had sat when they first met. She could see his mouth moving and knew he was pretending that she was in her usual place on the other side of the invisible barrier. Gaoler, never one

to act on its own initiative, had only made visual records and had not turned on the audio pickups.

She had the machine skip ahead, cued to his presence. He still brought her things. A spear point he had made, a tanned kula hide, once even a bird's nest. *A primitive's idea of gifts*, she sneered, and cued the records ahead by ten years. He was there, older and with a crippled arm. She resisted the impulse to rewind and find out when he had been hurt. A small boy now came with him and played in the meadow while his father sat and talked to empty air. *So he took a wife after all*, she said to herself, but without the sneer. She cued ahead another ten years. He was gray-haired already. Such a short life span these primitives had. The small boy was now a young hunter. She was surprised that he was still patient enough to come with his father to the House. She hit the button again, another ten-year jump. He was still there, sitting just beyond her garden. The once fluid movements were now halting and painful. There was a young girl with him now. His granddaughter? There was a rather permanent-looking shelter built in the meadow. He probably could no longer make the journey back to camp easily. She hit the cue button one last time. Last week. A doddering old man, bald as an egg but with the keen eyes of his youth, sat on the rock. The young girl was a teenager with a baby of her own on her hip.

She slammed the button that turned off the display. Her cry echoed down the hallways.

"God damn it, Gaoler! Why didn't you wait until he was dead before you woke me up?"

The voice came from the walls. The actual physical extrusion of Gaoler was elsewhere.

"Your instructions were for forty standard years, Citizen Rasmulah. There was no mention of extenuating factors." She put her head down on the console and cried.

SHE HAD BEEN A TEENAGER HERSELF then, passionately fired with her beliefs, proud in her martyrdom but still secretly hoping that Daddy would save her. Unfortunately the Judgement Panel was not swayed by her father's wealth or political influence. The Unitarian Governance was proud of its reputation for unswerving justice. Her friends had already been sentenced and sent to their prisons. Their joint statement still smoldered in the downtown of the capital city as the memorial services for the innocent bystanders were being televised. Her eyes were dark holes in her white face, which was made even more pallid by the bilious green of the prison jumpsuit.

One thousand years with Suspend option. Quite a reasonable sentence for a misguided youth. It would be little different from a stint in a Social Correction Center except for the fact that when she came home, everyone she had known would be dead for hundreds of years. In shock, her father blustered and her mother cried. At the designated time, she was rendered unconscious for the journey, and awoke some time later in the

House.

The House was situated in a valley with gentle hills on one side and a fairly impressive mountain range on the other. A dense forest of trees carpeted everything except the tops of the peaks and a perfectly circular area around the House. The resulting meadow was a riot of wild flowers, complemented by the tame flowers in her garden. The House was well appointed. There were both water and high freq showers. The House computer contained every book and vis-entertainment made in the last five hundred years. The medical facilities were excellent and the cuisine quite adequate. None of this made up for the lack of human companionship or helped her forget about the repel field just beyond the fragrant gardens that ringed the House. Gaoler, an antigrav bot that was the mobile unit of the House computer, would respond to direct questions and obey most of her commands. Its designation was a string of numbers and letters, but it would answer to "Gaoler." One of the questions it would not answer was where she was. The planet was not one of the sixteen in the tri-solar Unity, and the House computer would not allow her access to star charts to make a further attempt at identification. The Suspend box was there in a room of its own, for use completely at her discretion. She could sleep away her thousand-year prison term, but there would be permanent physical deterioration resulting from a prolonged Suspend sleep. She could forego the box and live out the hundred or so years left

to her in real time; end it as soon as possible and be done with gilded cages. Or she could live off and on, real time and Suspend, and finish her millennium about fifty years older than when she had started. Celia Rasmulah put a high premium on survival; suicide never even occurred to her. She chose the third option.

She thought she was alone on the planet until her third awakening. She was being prudent, sleeping for five years and living real time for the full year it took her body to recover. She would juggle the intervals a bit to make sure she wasn't totally decrepit when it came time to go home, but long sleeps frightened her. Even the relatively short stint of five years left her as weak as a baby for a month. She spent that recovery time at the computer console. The interactive games were too much for her weakened state, and she couldn't concentrate long enough to finish a novel. Out of boredom, she finally opened the assignment file that her wardens had included in her datapak. She scanned the list with disbelief. Climatic changes, meteorological data, axis wobbling? If she had wanted to be a planethugger, she would have taken planetary studies in school. Here she was in prison and they expected to get free work out of her too. She tried to delete the file but of course the House computer refused her that privilege.

She staggered out to the garden to vent her anger on some flowerbeds. Real destruction was beyond her capabilities and she had to content herself with shuffling back and

forth through the colored masses of flowers. Gaoler would repair the damage overnight, erasing all evidence of her slow-motion rampage. She was leaning against one of the House's smooth walls when a movement out of the corner of her eye made her jerk her head around. The savage was standing just outside the perimeter. He looked wary but not alarmed; accustomed, it seemed, to young women throwing temper tantrums. Celia shouted at the House.

"Gaoler, repel field on!"

"The field has been activated for the past ten minutes since the appearance of the indigenous life form." That would mean the savage had been watching the entirety of her tantrum. She wobbled over to the perimeter, confident in its ability to protect her.

"What do you want?" she asked venomously, hoping that her tone would adequately convey her feelings. The savage was not fazed in the slightest, and put his hand out between them. It encountered the prickly resistance of the repel field but he left it in place and looked at Celia with obvious enquiry.

"Ah, so you are the curious primate, are you? The one who goes on to discover fire and toasted weenies while your friends huddle in the dark and eat raw meat."

The savage withdrew his hand and hunkered down. That looked like a good idea and Celia allowed her legs to buckle underneath her. The savage was pleased that she had agreed to be sociable. At least he seemed to be within a couple of rungs of her on the evolutionary

ladder. He was probably a descendant of a lost colony ship overlooked by the Unitarian Governance when it had absorbed all the independent colonies in the sector. Had the authorities known of a human presence on the planet, they never would have put the House here. No outside interference with her punishment was to be tolerated.

This particular specimen had no technological trappings about him. He wore a mustache and his hair was tied back with a leather thong. His clothing was a curious mixture of animal hides and crudely woven textiles. Celia curled her lip at them.

"Can't decide whether to be a hunter or a gatherer, eh?"

The savage decided that she needed to start with the basics. He pointed carefully to himself and clearly enunciated his name.

"Olin." Then he pointed at her to make sure she got the idea. Celia teetered, oblivious, on the edge of a momentous decision: Be offended or submit to the humor of the situation. The loneliness surged over her and she smiled.

"Olin." She pronounced carefully and then pointed at her own chest. "Celia."

"Ceeleeeah." He repeated, proud of her that she had understood so quickly. They talked for the rest of the afternoon, pacing the perimeter while Celia pointed at objects and asked Olin for their names. As dusk neared, Olin, with a great show of regret, pantomimed that he had to leave. Celia spent the evening going over the vocabulary from their conversation, recorded by Gaoler as

instructed. She had always had a knack for languages and was able to repeat every word flawlessly for Olin the next afternoon. It was only a matter of weeks before they could communicate reasonably well, well enough for Olin to ask her about the invisible barrier that separated them. Could she not come out or he go in?

"No, it's always there." Celia lied. Actually, the repel field was too energy-demanding to be kept constantly activated. Celia was kept within the perimeter by a brain implant wired to her pain centers.

Olin persisted. "But the birds come and go. Once I saw a baby helias come in. You played with it until its mother called it back." Celia froze. That had been in her first year on the planet, before her first Suspend. She looked at him coldly.

"That was twenty seasons ago." She had to flash her fingers for the word "twenty." "How long have you been spying on me?" He did not ask her what "spying" meant. It was evident from the context. He did not look ashamed when he answered.

"Since I was a boy. The elders had forbidden anyone to come near the tent with the smooth and shiny walls, so of course I came. I watched you, but then you did not come for many circles of seasons. When I was a new hunter, with my first bleeding just behind me, you came out of the tent again and I watched you. When you stopped coming out, I waited, hoping you would come back as before. When you did, I swore I would speak to

you."

"I don't like the idea that you were watching me."

"Why? I watch you like I watch the kula or the helias. To learn your habits and to understand your spirit."

Celia raised her eyebrows. "So that you can hunt me?"

Olin smiled, a flash of white in his tanned face. "As a man hunts a woman, perhaps."

Celia snorted. "Fat chance you have of that. I'm not letting you in here ever, my skin-clad friend." Olin cocked his head. He had missed most of that reply but the meaning was clear.

"I think I have one, maybe two circles of seasons before you go into the tent not to come out again for many circles." He paused looking for confirmation but Celia merely raised an eyebrow at him. "I am a good talker. Maybe I can talk myself in, like the birds. Then you will not go away."

CELIA FOUND HERSELF HUMMING as she prepared dinner that night. Her fork paused on the way to her mouth as she realized that she had actually enjoying flirting with a hairy, louse-infested, spear-carrying savage. What a comedown from the most sought-after socialite in the trisystem. If her friends could see her now, they'd burst a gut laughing. Except the few friends she had were in prisons similar to her own with just a bot to talk to. They didn't have any inopportune savages slinking around their perimeters.

She swallowed her mouthful and addressed the walls. "Gaoler, have



you reported Olin to the Wardens? When are they coming to move me?"

"I have no specific instructions regarding indigenous sentient life forms, Citizen Rasmulah. No action has been taken."

Celia's eyebrows raised in surprise. An oversight in Gaoler's programming. How delicious. She could certainly take advantage of it. However, the savage was indeed inopportune to think that she would be interested in him. She would punish Olin for his presumption. She would not come out and talk to him tomorrow. That should put a crimp in his seduction schedule.

She held to her vow the next day but watched him through the vid pickups. He was worried rather than angry which surprised her. She listened to him call her name, asking if she were ill or hurt. Celia found herself becoming increasingly discomforted. As casually as possible, she emerged from the House and strolled over to the perimeter. Olin's relief was obvious and turned to anger only after he saw she was all right.

"You"—and he used the formal *leh* instead of the familiar *lah*—"should not do such things. If you do not wish to speak with me, you tell me, and then leave. You do not let me stay out here for a quarter-day, thinking all is not well with you." He stood with his arms across his chest, his expression stony.

Celia tossed her head. "I don't have to answer to you. I did not feel like talking to you today. All I do is explain things to you and I'm tired of it. How does Gaoler fly, why do

I sleep so long, on and on. I am not here to pull you out of the stone age." She used the formal *leh* as well.

"I do not understand, Ceeleeeah. We talk for many half-days and you do not seem tired."

"That's the problem, Olin. You don't understand. You can't talk about anything that interests me. You are stupid." She glanced sideways to gauge his reaction.

He rose. "I understand your words. What I do not understand is why you use them to hurt. I would make better use of my time hunting. I will come back when talking to me does not bore you."

Celia panicked. She had lost control of the situation.

"I'm sorry, Olin. I did not mean those words and I will not stay inside when you come. Please don't leave." She was vaguely aware that this was the first sincere apology of her life. Olin was only slightly mollified.

"I should not come tomorrow. The elders complain that I do not spend enough time finding meat for my tribe. I should leave and follow the helias herds until I have all the meat I will need for the winter."

Celia bit her lip. "Don't leave. I said I was sorry. You upset me yesterday with your talk of hunting. I do not wish to be hunted by you."

"Ah," comprehension lit Olin's face. "You are playing a courting game. You are right. I did not understand."

Celia stamped her foot. "I'm not playing a stupid courting game. I am not interested in you as a mate. Get that through your head. We are

not the same, you and I. I can never leave this House. That is the truth. It would kill me to go through this wall." She indicated the invisible perimeter with an open-palmed wave.

"That would not matter. I would come to you, always." Now he was using the intimate *lan* rather than the familiar *lah*. The man *was* a good talker.

"Olin, you were right when you guessed that I would only be here for four, maybe five more seasons. Then I will go away to sleep for seven circles of seasons. This cannot change. I would like to be friends with you while I am awake, but I will not be your wife, and I will not let you in here. Can you accept that?"

"I will until you tell me differently," Olin replied without any apparent dismay. He patted his robes. "I forgot. I brought a present for you." He pulled out a hide-wrapped bundle. Celia eyed him suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"You will have to unwrap it to see." Olin replied, an open, innocent expression on his face. Celia gnawed her lower lip.

"All right, walk away from the perimeter. Stop there." She turned her head towards the House and raised her voice.

"Gaoler, negate external repel field."

"Are you certain, Citizen Rasmulah? This unit will use deadly force against the indigenous life form if it should prove hostile."

"You're not hostile, are you, Olin? And you will give me your

word you will not try and cross the field?" Olin nodded, grinning broadly. Celia narrowed her eyes but gave the order to negate the field.

"Now throw it to me."

Olin complied good-naturedly and as soon as she had the bundle in her hands, she had Gaoler resurrect the field. She eagerly unwrapped it. It was a carving of a helias, quite detailed and done in a black stone veined with silver. She looked up at Olin, speechless.

"Do you like my gift, Ceeleeah?"

"It's beautiful, Olin."

"I will bring more now and then, so that you do not get bored talking to me."

Celia reddened but met his eyes.

"I'd like that, Olin."

OLIN DID HAVE TO LEAVE FOR several weeks to hunt and help his semi-nomadic tribe move to their winter camp. Celia was lonely during his absence. She dove into the datapak, selecting pictures from each of the sixteen planets to show Olin on her port. He came back with the first snows and she ran to the perimeter, unaware that her pleasure at his return showed clearly on her face.

As the days became shorter, Olin had to leave her earlier to get back to the camp before dark. The nocturnal kulas were active in the wintertime and would not hesitate to pull down a lone man. Celia and Olin had been playing chess all day on a crude facsimile of a board using pieces that he had carved from the black stone. Celia always felt slightly ridiculous playing out at the

perimeter with a fire blazing on Olin's side and a portable heater set up on hers. The weather had been particularly cold and both were bundled up with only their eyes showing. It would make much more sense just to let him into the House so they could play on a table in comfort, but Celia had no intention of appearing to yield to Olin's persuasion. She bit her lower lip in indecision as she watched him trudge off on his snowshoes. He had left it too late this time and would have to travel quickly to get home before nightfall. Maybe she should have offered to let him spend the night in the House. He was a man of his word. If she asked him to stay out of her room, he would have. It was herself that she didn't trust. *It's just the loneliness*, she thought. After three and half years real time on her own, even a savage would start to look good. It would never do to admit to herself that he had ceased being just a savage to her weeks, no, months ago.

She had just gone to bed when Gaoler's voice suddenly burst from the walls.

"There are a number of indigenuous life forms near the perimeter, Citizen Rasmulah. The repel field is activated for your safety."

"Well what about it?" Celia asked, annoyed at being startled. "It's probably a pack of kulas marauding."

"That is correct, Citizen Rasmulah. However, your instructions have been to notify you when the life form known as 'Olin' is in the vicinity. One of the life forms outside is so identified." Celia burst out

of the door and floundered through the snow, coatless and her feet clad only in slippers.

"Lights!" she shouted and obediently the floodlights along the edge of the roof illuminated the tree line on the other side of the meadow. Three figures raced towards her across its snowy expanse. The lead figure had a strange flailing gait. *A man running on snowshoes*, her mind said, solving the abnormality. The two shapes behind were kulas, low to the ground but bounding through the snow as if their legs were on springs.

"Gaoler, turn off the external repeller," she ordered.

"Citizen Rasmulah, there are hostile life forms..."

She interrupted the bot. "Gaoler, you are an advanced machine. Time it so that Olin can get in, then lock out the kulas."

"As instructed, Citizen Rasmulah."

Celia had reached the limits of her prison and was forced to watch helplessly as Olin floundered towards her. With an impossible spring, the kula nearest to him leapt into the air and sank its teeth into his leg. Olin fell face first in the snow and desperately scabbled with his arms for any kind of purchase to keep the kula from dragging him back into the woods. The second kula joined them and started worrying at the other leg.

Celia screamed and pressed against the perimeter until her head was ready to split. Her cry seemed to galvanize Olin and he twisted around in the kulas' grip. With a hunter's instinct, he held on to his spear and he stabbed at the first

kula. The beast yelped and sprang away. The other kula was confused and let go of Olin's leg. It was probably a pup, alarmed by the adult's reaction to what should be helpless prey. Olin started to painfully drag himself towards Celia. Two more kulas emerged from the forest edge. Celia knelt so as to be at eye level with Olin. She beckoned frantically as if that could hurry him. Just short of the perimeter, he faltered. The kulas had regrouped and were closing fast.

"Damn you, Olin," she screamed. "Don't die on my doorstep." Ignoring the pain, she pushed into the perimeter. Her nose started pouring blood and the pressure in her skull felt like a vice closing. She hung in agony. Then she was in Olin's arms as they fell backwards into the compound. The lead kula smashed into the repel field and rebounded into the meadow, shaking its head in confusion.

They lay in the snow, their arms wrapped tightly around each other for the first time.

"Gaoler," she whispered. "Medical attention."

SHE STOOD AT THE DOOR OF HER room watching him sleep. His leg was bandaged from thigh to calf. The pup had only scratched the other. She had wasted precious time shouting at Gaoler before he would extend the full capabilities of the House's medical facilities to Olin. The hunter would be weeks abed waiting for the muscle to rebuild under the biobandage. While she stood there, his eyes flickered open and fixed on her face. She

marveled at the fact that he was still conscious. He smiled.

"You see. I was able to talk my way into your tent."

She sat down on the edge of his bed and smoothed the long hair back out of his eyes. "Well, you picked a hell of painful way to do it. Any woman would feel flattered."

"You are not just any woman, Ceeleeah."

"You *are* a good talker." She let him pull her down beside him. "What about your leg?"

"I will not be needing it right now." He silenced her laughter with his mouth.

OLIN WAS HER GUEST FOR THE rest of the winter. She introduced him to the House computer and often had to drag him off the console for meals. He was learning how to speak tri-system from a schooling database and honing his language skills on the Day-in-the-Life vid serials. He was quite upset when he reached the last installment in her library and Celia had to tell him that she did not get updates. He would not play board games with the computer, only with her, and dismissed the interactive vid games as not useful. Celia suspected that the strange settings and weapons discomfited him more than he would admit. Gaoler had made a wheel chair under protest to give Olin limited mobility. He would wheel himself to the viewing windows in the main room and watch the snow-covered mountain range with an intense concentration. Celia finally realized that he was simply willing himself to get well.

She also slowly realized that when she had become his lover, he made the assumption that she had agreed to become his wife. In spite of that, she still joined him every night. For a savage, he had some very sophisticated notions. She would not stay with him afterwards but, instead, finished the night on the recovery couch in the Suspend room. She knew she woke him each time she slid out of the bed, but he did not comment on it. Perhaps he thought it was some custom of people who dwelled in smooth-walled tents. All she understood is that she did not want the intimacy of waking up beside him in the morning.

They still talked for hours, but Celia gradually found herself drawing away, which was difficult in such close quarters. She hid in her vid games or walked the perimeter endlessly. She knew Olin watched her from the window, wondering what kept her out there. He finally broached the subject one day as she pulled her boots off, shaking from exhaustion.

"Ceeleeah, I will be better soon. I know you are not used to being with me all the time. After we are married, I will have to spend time at the camp and also I will be gone hunting. It will not be as hard for you."

"Hard for me, Olin?" She shucked off her coat and stood staring at him. "The problem is, it's too easy. So easy, I could just stay here with you and let my life pass by. And then where does that leave me? An old woman, too old to go back home and take up where I left

off. Do you really think my destiny is to be the woman of a primitive on some godforsaken planet?"

Olin's face closed in on itself. "My love is all I have to offer you, Ceeleeah."

"Stop calling me that. My name is Celia. If you can't say it right, don't say it at all!" She turned to storm out of the room but her shoulder caught on the shelf that Gaoler made for her, the one that held all of Olin's presents. It shifted and the little black helias, his first gift to her, teetered and fell to the floor. It shattered and Celia fell to her knees with an inarticulate cry. Olin started forward, his chair wheels crushing black fragments. He reached out to Celia but she pulled back. Tears ran down her face.

"I shouldn't care about this. I shouldn't care about you. There are better things waiting for me, as soon as I finish my sentence. You know the slate gets wiped clean, after I've paid, don't you, Olin? No one will even mention the embarrassing fact that I killed people. Didn't you even wonder why I am trapped in this House? You know this is a prison, don't you, Olin? It's obvious. How do you feel about having a wife who killed innocent people? Maybe you should choose a bit more carefully."

There was only pain on Olin's face. "I have loved you since I was a child. I cannot turn away no matter how much you want me to. It is only you that keeps yourself from being happy."

"Happy? I don't think I'll ever be that here." She left the room,



passing Gaoler, who was hovering at the door. "There's a mess in there to clean up, Gaoler."

Hours later, Olin said nothing when she slipped in beside him, merely opening his arms to her and stroking her hair while she cried. Neither made mention of her outburst again.

Finally the day came when the biobandage beeped and fell off Olin's leg. He was able to walk immediately, since the bandage had toned the muscles once they had been rebuilt. She remembered with amusement how she had to calm him when the bandage had started its first massage cycle. He wanted to return to camp as soon as possible to mollify the elders who had not been happy with his decision to recuperate at the House. The snows had given way to the leafy muck of spring. She stood at the doorway watching the crossed snowshoes tied to his pack vanish into the woods. She closed the door softly and turned to Gaoler.

"Prepare the Suspend room for me, Gaoler."

"What is the duration of your Suspend sleep, Citizen Rasmulah?"

"Make it forty standard years."

"As you wish, Citizen Rasmulah."

THE OLD MAN WAS BLIND. SHE could see that, now that she was closer. The teenage girl startled like a helias, clutching her baby to her protectively. She opened her mouth to speak and Celia put her fingers to her lips. The girl obediently settled. After all, her grandfather must have told her about Celia.

She bent at the knees and put her

fingertips up to his face as if to touch it. All she felt was the prickling of the repel field.

"Olin," she said softly.

"Ceeleeah." He turned towards her voice. "You have woken."

THE LAST BREATH SHUDDERED OUT of his spent frame. Celia gently placed the hand she had been holding on the still chest. She went to the door of the room that had been Olin's for the last five years.

"Gaoler," she whispered. The bot floated up silently.

"Activate program 6, please."

"Yes, Citizen Rasmulah." The bot drifted out to the garden and began cutting a hole in the ground approximately six feet deep. Celia stood at the window and watched him work. She looked beyond the garden to the village that had grown up around Olin's shelter. The few remaining tents were being quickly replaced with square-timbered houses. She saw a familiar figure directing some men as they raised a heavy beam to the top of a wall using a block and tackle. Celia knew that as soon as he was finishing supervising that job, Perral, who took his position as village headman a little too seriously, would be pestering her for the artesian well design she had promised him. She smiled tiredly and picked up the heavy branch of ironwood that she had asked Olin's grandniece to bring her. Not granddaughter. Olin had never taken a tribeswoman to wife. She stepped into the Suspend room and looked at the coffin-sized box.

"If only I had done this forty-five

years ago." She raised the branch in the air and brought it crashing down on the transparent canopy. "Well, better late than never." The noise woke Olin's great-grand-nephew in the front room and Celia hurried to finish the job so that she could go comfort the infant.

THE SMALL ORBIT-TO-GROUND transport ship touched down lightly in the meadow. A man stepped out and walked up to the repel field, frowning at the wooden and stone buildings clustered in the meadow. He held a device out at waist level and the field vanished, a sharp smell of ozone drifting across the garden to Celia. She shaded her eyes to see better, brushing the white wisps of hair out of her eyes.

"Granny Celia, who is it?" asked one of the children seated at her feet.

"Just a visitor, Ashla. You take the others inside and get some drinks. Take your lessons with you." The children picked up their ports and went inside the House, casting sideways glances at the stranger waiting to talk to Celia. There was a small gathering of villagers forming at a polite distance.

"Citizen Celia Rasmulah?" The man asked doubtfully.

"The same, Citizen. What can I do for you?"

He looked at her with dismay. "It has only been one hundred and ten years since you were transported here. Did your Suspend box break

down? You should have told us; we would have repaired it."

Celia smiled. "No need, Citizen, I opted to spend my sentence in real time. Can I offer you some refreshment? Oh, and I have completed the assignment package included in the House computer's datapak. I'll put it on a port so you can take it with you. The satellite picked up some very curious weather patterns over the Southern continent."

The visitor shook his head. "Citizen Rasmulah, I have come to tell you that your sentence has been commuted to residency in a Social Correction Center. New developments in teenage psychology treatments have eliminated the asocial inclinations that caused you to be sent here. The Review Panel felt that society was at fault for not devising a cure in time to help you. With counseling, you may be released on your own recognisance within a standard year."

Celia looked at the young man, barely into his twenties. "I refuse the commutation of my sentence."

He frowned. "That is within your legal rights, Citizen, but why? Why stay here in prison?"

Celia took him gently by the elbow and guided him around the side of the House to the bench that served as Olin's tombstone.

"Let me tell you about prisons, young man. It's a long story but by the time I'm done, you'll understand that I'm already free." 🍁

## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

LESLIE BROWN ("Nor Iron Bars a Cage"), when not researching brain receptors at the National Research Council in Ottawa, enjoys tormenting her female co-workers with incremental chapters of an unfinished romance novel. This is her second published story.

LINDA J. DUNN ("Sonata in Weapons") is a computer specialist at a government facility in Indianapolis, IN. She has two adult children with diverse interests, one of whom performs in a rock band. Her website is at <<http://www.sff.net/people/LJDUNN>>.

J. S. LYSTER ("Corrective Surgery") is the publisher and co-editor of *BIM*, a west-coast magazine for writers and artist. His short story, "The Hunter if the Guileless" (*Storyteller Magazine*, Fall 1998), was nominated for the Arthur Ellis award for crime fiction.

DONNA MCMAHON ("Squat") lives a bisected West Coast life: one half in Vancouver where the cafes are always full of people talking on cell phones, and the other half in Gibson's Landing, where the Bargain Store parking lot is always full of pick-up trucks. Her interest in future crimes is strictly theoretical. Donna's first novel, *Dance of Knives*, will be published by Tor in November 2000.

STEVE MOHN ("Sonny Boy") lives and writes in Montreal.

MARIANNE O. NIELSEN ("Alien Intent") is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at Northern Arizona University. Her work has appeared in previous issues of *On Spec* and in more academic journals that she really cares to think about this morning. (See "Alien Rites and Wrongs" in *On Spec* Spring 1997, our Canadian Geographic theme issue, for more on Oland and Kah'hatten.)

KEITH SCOTT ("A Slope So Slippery") was born in Lunenburg, Manchuria, 1920, of Missionary parents, and spent much of his youth in Korea, returning to Canada in the mid-1930s. During World War II, he flew Spitfires in the RCAF. After the war, he met his future wife and soulmate, Billie, to whom he was to be married for 52 years. A member of Toronto's Cecil Street Writers' Group, Keith was the author of more than 20 published sf/f stories; he also wrote radio-plays for CBC. *On Spec* is pleased and proud to have published seven of those 20 stories: "Water" (Fall 1991 and *On Spec: The First Five Years*), "A Swim in the Rocks" (Fall 1993), "Whose Lifeboat?" (Winter 1994), "Duty Suit" (Winter 1995), "Doomball" (Fall 1997), "Keffie and Scragman" (Winter 1998), and "A Slope So Slippery" (Spring 2000).

REBECCA M. SENESE ("The Echo of Bones") is a Toronto-based writer who writes crime fiction, horror and science fiction, often all at once in the same story. Nominated for numerous Aurora awards, her work has appeared in *Deadbolt Magazine*, *On Spec*, *The Vampire's Crypt*, *imelod* and *Into the Darkness*.

PETER WATTS (Frontispiece "Alien Intent"), although better known as the author of *Starfish* (Tor 1999) surprised us all with an artistic side. About his illustration, he says: "This shows the homicidal herbivores placed beneath an inverted trophic pyramid with a classic predator/prey equation expressed as an inequality. This last illo will be hailed as amazingly clever by animal ecology post-grad readers. ... I tried to make the beasties as alien as I could while still being faithful to the descriptions: the Kohoet's eye came out of a frog; I based the texture of the talons on gazelle antlers; I think the beak was originally a cashew." 🍂



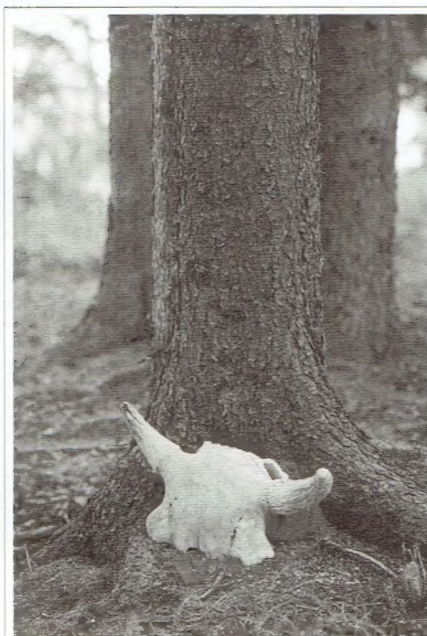
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